

A field of white snowdrops in bloom, with a bright, hazy sky in the background. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, and the overall scene is soft and peaceful.

CrossReach

Devotional Resource

January - March

The following material was originally written to be part of the Sanctuary First Daily Worship online resource (available every day from sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship). The pieces are drawn from a number of different years and are presented in this collection in a new sequence and can be used in any season. The theme introductions at the start of each section are condensed snippets to give a flavour of the original resources (a back catalogue of all these themes and more can be found on the Sanctuary First website). We hope and pray that you find inspiration, comfort and encouragement.

In 2019 we celebrated 150 years of social care in the Church of Scotland and were able to acknowledge the special contribution that CrossReach has made during that time through the dedicated service of staff and volunteers both past and present. 2020 highlighted the critical nature of the support we provide as well as the enormous commitment of all as we tackled the coronavirus pandemic.

We know that for many of you that service is rooted in the practice of spending time in the presence of God, either alone or as part of your team.

Viv Dickenson
Chief Executive Officer

Images courtesy of Heart for Art artists, Shutterstock and Fiona Campbell.

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Holy Endings

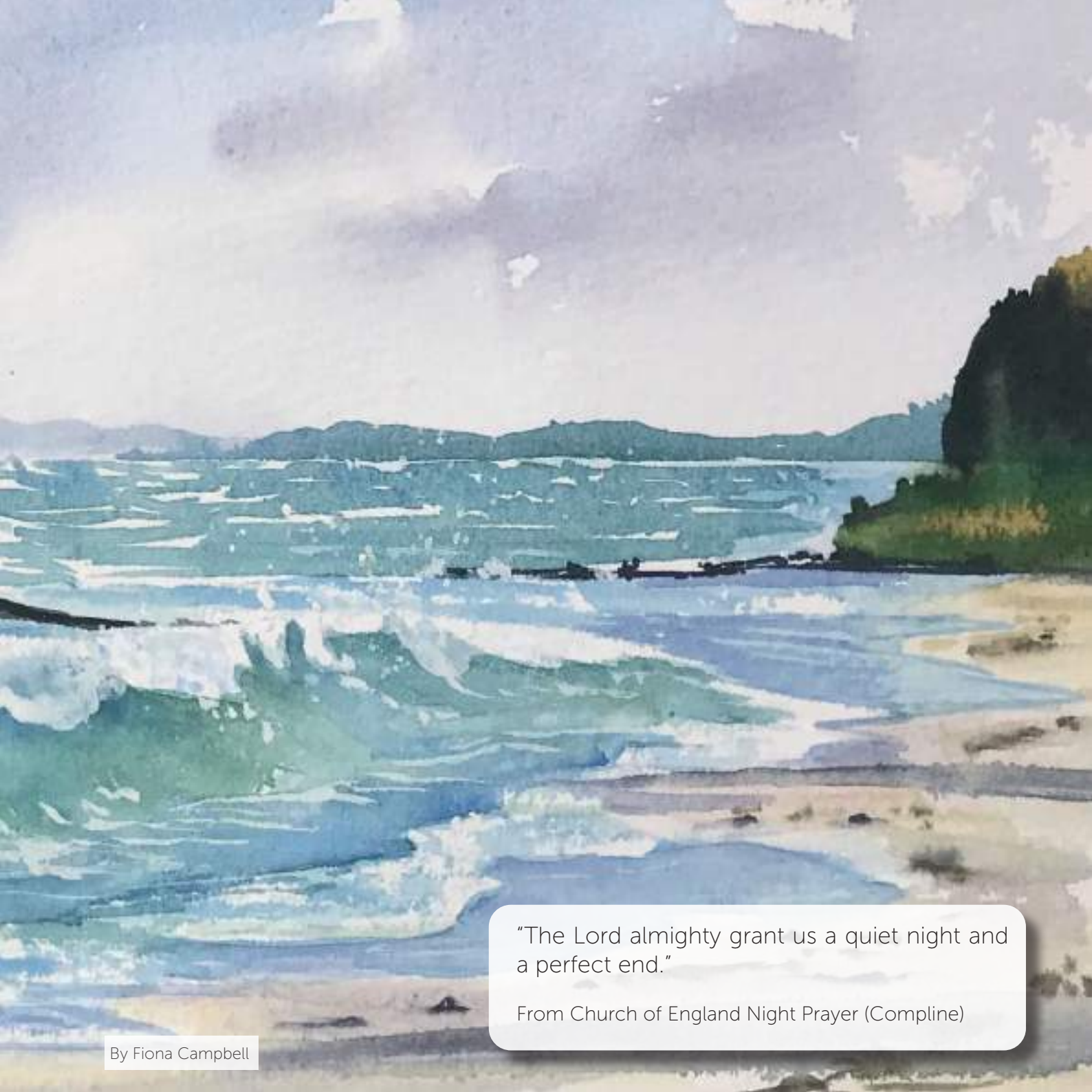
It is an inescapable part of life that despite our best hopes, wishes and intentions, sometimes things just fall apart. They break down unexpectedly, permanently and irreversibly.

Lives end prematurely, relationships fracture, buildings close their doors, enterprises fold, projects wind up. Sometimes these breakdowns are shocking and painful, and at other times drawn out and wearying, and sometimes they are a joyous celebration, a bittersweet farewell to what has been.

So we will be exploring prayerfully bringing things to an end with dignity, care and love. Rather than making New Year resolutions to resolve to do new things, we are going to resolve to let go, to stop, to allow things to run their course, to reach 'a holy ending'.

Our God does not stand apart when we suffer. God is with us as we sift through the pieces, the tatters, the ruins. When something has broken down completely and we are entirely out of our depth, helpless and lost, our God gives us the opportunity to give something a holy ending - to hand it over, in all its messiness and pain and guilt and doubt - to let go in love. With God's grace, we can learn to tell the story of who we are, with all the twists and turns woven into a new narrative.





"The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end."

From Church of England Night Prayer (Compline)

For everything there is a season

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Seasons are funny things.

Some people love summer, thriving in the sunlight and warmth. Other people hate it, sweating away under shelters to escape. Some people love winter with its snow and the prospect of wintry celebrations and food. Other people can't stand the cold and the darkness.

I think our lives are a bit like this. Each person's seasons are different; some people thrive in times of life where others falter. Such is the ebb and flow of our lifelong rhythm.

It can be very hard to watch others in their season when you are experiencing such a different, one but God is in all of the seasons and we are never truly going through them alone.

Prayer:

God, we have so many seasons in our lives and some of them feel so hard to bear.

Help us to zoom out and see the big picture of who we are and where we are going.

Be with us as we trudge forward through our own season of trials towards one of contentment.

God, look after us and play us the rhythm when we forget how it sounds.

Amen.

Rhythm of life

Genesis 1: 1-5

...and there was evening and there was morning...
...and there was evening and there was morning...

In the week between Christmas and New Year, many of us can lose track of what day it is. Days roll into one another in a haze of sleep, television, food and fun with family and friends. Yet we do tend to know when we've completed a day, even if we can't quite remember which day it is. The sun sets. We retire to bed. Day: complete.

For some people, this day-to-day rhythm of knowing a day is complete, whilst not quite knowing the day of the week, is an ongoing reality. Whether they are in prison or hospital, serving on military operations or out at sea, the passage of time becomes a daily rhythm rather than weekly, monthly, or even yearly. There is an immediacy and intimacy in this type of living which can lead us into the heart of a God outwith time, who invites us to live into creation as it really is: here and now.

Prayer:

Creator of time and space.
We rejoice in the pulsing rhythms of life:
evening and morning,
sleep and wakefulness,
sunset and sunrise.
In each cycle,
enable us to flow with your Spirit
rather than struggle against Her,
so we may join with the powerful beat of life—
strong within us,
resounding throughout the universe—
as it is right now.
Amen.

In the end

Luke 2: 25-38

When exploring the theme 'Holy Endings, Simeon and Anna really do spring to mind.

Simeon has been told he will not see death until he has met Jesus. Nowadays, in our culture, death is something that we really would rather avoid, so if we were told something like this, what is the chance we would run as far away from that temple as possible so as to live longer?

I would certainly be tempted.

But Simeon stays where he is, he waits for Jesus, knowing it will mean his end. He waits, and when the sign that his end is near arrives, he praises God for sending light into the world, even if he doesn't get to see it.

Anna is a prophet of a 'great age' who has lived a long life, first with family and then growing closer to God living and worshipping in the temple. The rhythms of the temple and the Jewish faith are her comfort and life, yet when a child comes who will shake it all up and bring change she praises God and excitedly tells everyone she can.

Neither Anna nor Simeon will live to see the lifework of Jesus but both are happy to leave the world with hope that it, and the people left behind, will see better days.

Prayer:

God help us to face our endings well and with you.

Help us to have hope for the world to come.

Give us the strength to invite change into our lives and our faith.

God, please be with us as we seek holy endings and new beginnings through your grace and love.

Amen.

Restoration or transformation?

Isaiah 60: 1-6

In this passage, the prophet is promising that Zion will be restored to her previous glory. People dispersed under foreign rulers will return to the Promised Land. Poverty will be overtaken with wealth. Light will shine brightly where once there were clouds and darkness. It is a joyful and hopeful promise, but I am not convinced it is a restoration as much as a transformation.

We can never go back. Not really. We will always be changed and shaped by our experiences, whatever they are: good or bad, sought or unbidden. The invitation in Isaiah is to use our past to bring light, not darkness, into the future. Our future, and the future of the world.

Prayer:

Transformative God,
when you step in, nothing is ever the same again:
You transform poverty into abundance,
despair into hope,
death into everlasting life.
Take who we have been—
good,
bad,
indifferent.
Take what we have learnt
and transform us into someone beautiful,
radiant with light,
resplendent with hope,
replete with joy.
For nothing is wasted in your sight,
nothing is unredeemable,
everything has the potential to be transformed
for the coming of your Kingdom;
and in that we rejoice.
Amen.

Hope for tomorrow

Revelation 21: 1-6

The future can be a scary place, one where everything we fear might come to pass, or none of it might. It is something we have the power to shape even if we don't always have the confidence. When we are little we dream of the life ahead of us, but the older we get sometimes we seem to dream more of the life we have lived, as if perhaps there is nothing good to be found in the time we have left.

God doesn't seem to believe that.

We can still shape the future of the world because we know that God is shaping the future of our spirit. We can hope for what is to come for us and this gives us strength to make changes in our world which bring hope to those we will leave behind.

Prayer:

God we try our hardest to live in hope for tomorrow.

Please help us to rest in you

to entrust our loved ones to you

and to be strong enough to offer hope and change to the world.

Amen.

A point in time

Acts 19: 1-7

There is a growing trend for people to re-affirm vows that they have taken in the past. This is most usually seen in the re-affirmation of marriage vows, such as after a difficult time in a marriage or on a special anniversary. It is a way of marking what has gone before whilst recommitting to a future based on certain principles.

The same can be true of baptism, whether experienced as a baby, young person or adult. For those who have been baptised—a once-in-a-lifetime event—it is important to remember that point in history, to give thanks for what it has meant, and to look forward with faith, hope and love to what it promises for the future.

Prayer:

Things changed on that day, God,
when I stepped into the unknown:
making promises I wanted to keep
not knowing if I had the strength to do it.
In that moment
You held me,
seeing the potential,
knowing the uncertainty,
promising your presence.
Now,
right now,
where and how I am,
see me again;
allow me to let go in grateful thanks
for all that has been,
ready to grasp the possibilities of today
and tomorrow,
all in your presence and
in your love.
Amen.

Really see

Psalm 148: 7-13

Often I wish that my head were bigger. Not physically, although I do have a smaller than average head, but in what it can understand. As a Christian there is so much about God that I will never understand and I have to accept that as part of having faith.

But just imagine for a moment that we could see God, really see. The immense wonder of being outside of time, the minute details of creativity and in every cell on earth, the overwhelming love for each creature and cycle and being.

If we could see that, then would we suddenly know how easily, how carefully, and how gladly God can help us from a place of troubles to a place of letting go?

If we could see that, then what could we do except let go of our troubles and join the earth in celebration?

Prayer:

God, will we ever see you, will we ever understand you?

God, please help us to imagine as best we can.

Help us to let go of the troubles that tie our eyes to the ground so we can move on with you and see the wonder that you revel in every second.

Just for a moment, help us to see with your eyes.

Amen



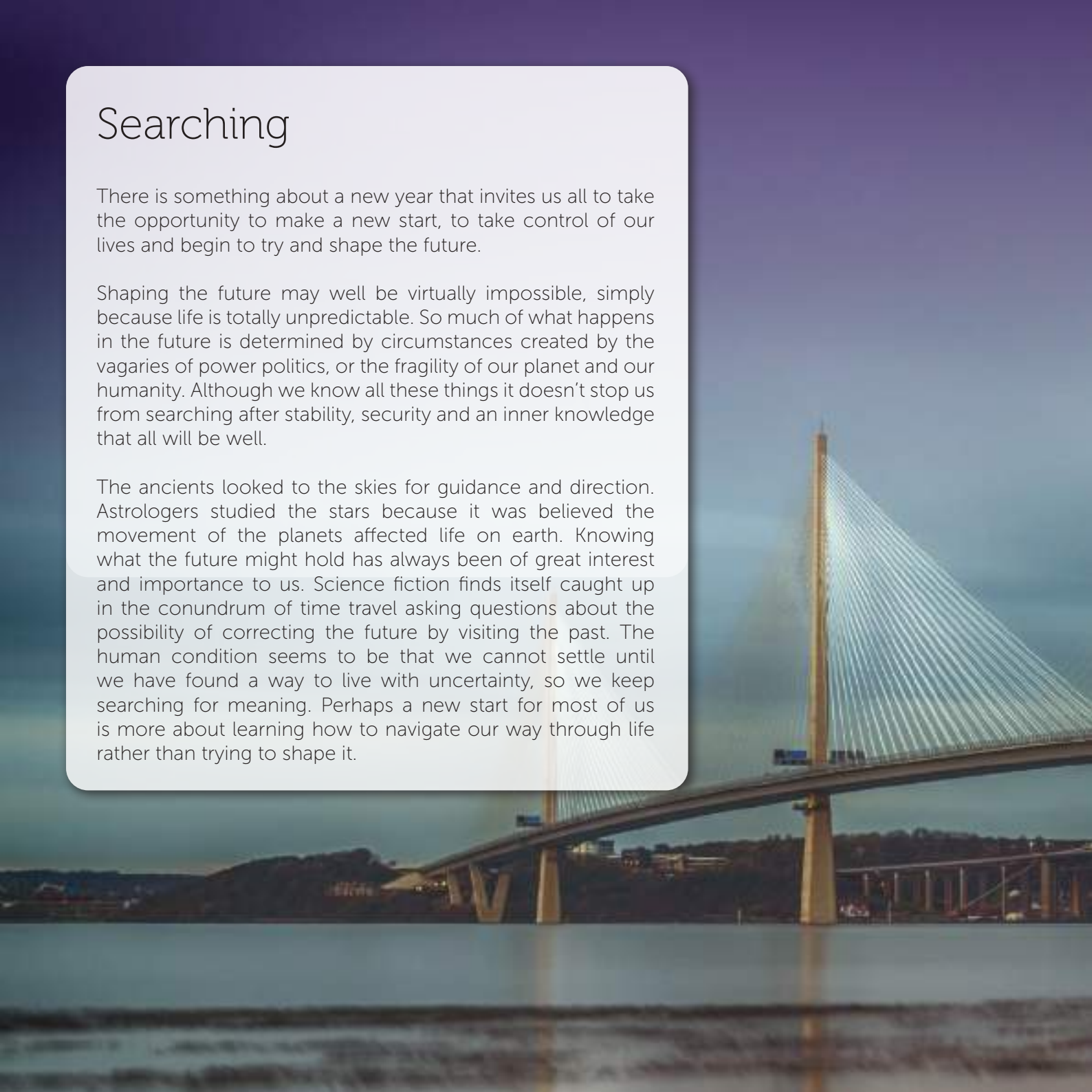
Songs:
Jesus you are changing me
All my hope on God is founded
Be thou my vision
Jesus take me as I am

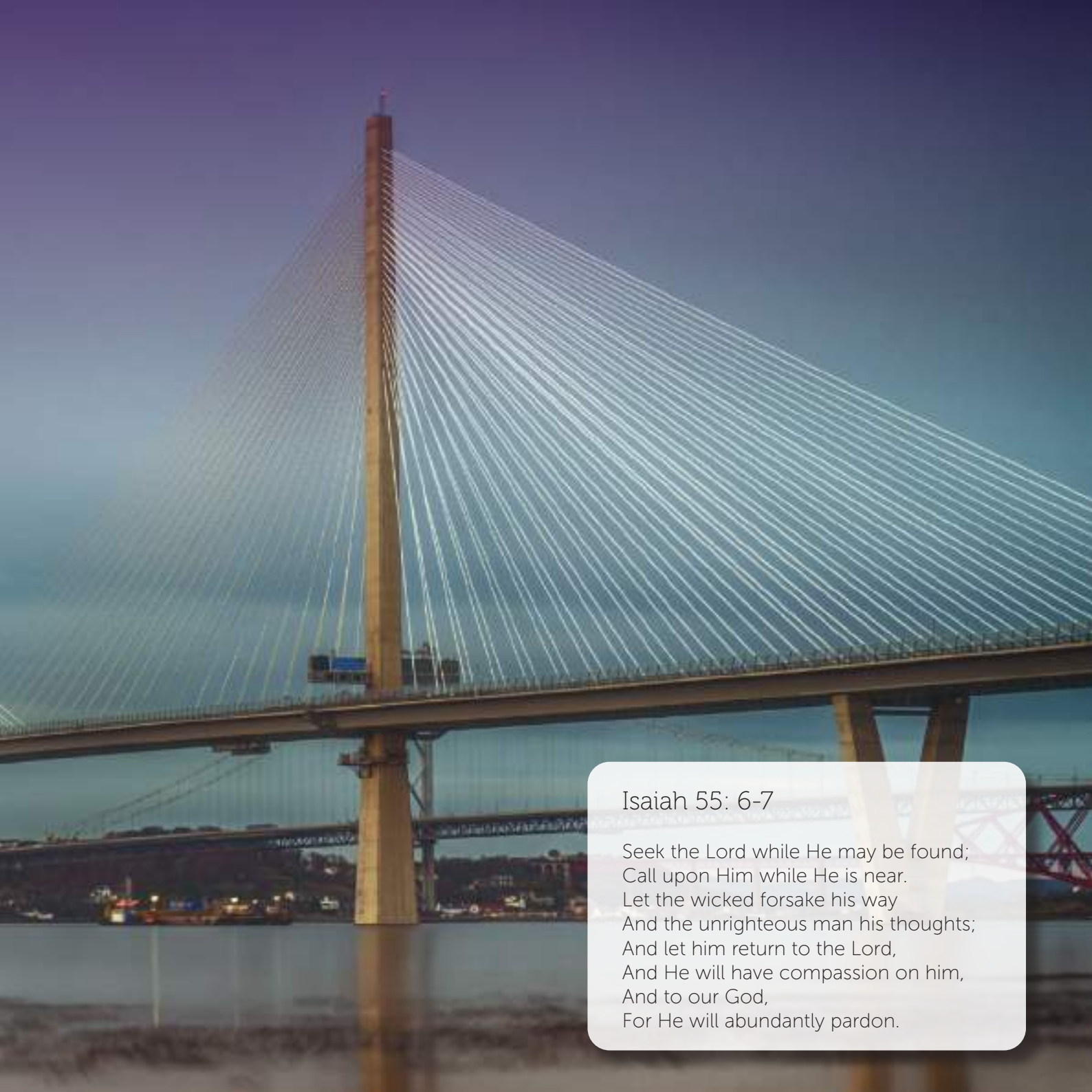
Searching

There is something about a new year that invites us all to take the opportunity to make a new start, to take control of our lives and begin to try and shape the future.

Shaping the future may well be virtually impossible, simply because life is totally unpredictable. So much of what happens in the future is determined by circumstances created by the vagaries of power politics, or the fragility of our planet and our humanity. Although we know all these things it doesn't stop us from searching after stability, security and an inner knowledge that all will be well.

The ancients looked to the skies for guidance and direction. Astrologers studied the stars because it was believed the movement of the planets affected life on earth. Knowing what the future might hold has always been of great interest and importance to us. Science fiction finds itself caught up in the conundrum of time travel asking questions about the possibility of correcting the future by visiting the past. The human condition seems to be that we cannot settle until we have found a way to live with uncertainty, so we keep searching for meaning. Perhaps a new start for most of us is more about learning how to navigate our way through life rather than trying to shape it.





Isaiah 55: 6-7

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.

In search of Hope

Isaiah 55: 6-7

The search for hope often hits us when we are really feeling beaten down by whatever circumstances overwhelm us and all is grey and dark. Imagine in that place receiving an invitation with a promise to return to God and embrace the new future and hope. This new future is not just a spiritual resolve, it is concerned with God's ways and plans that are about a whole new hope full of possibilities that re-orientate the way of one's life and that of the community.

Prayer:

May God bless us with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
so that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in the world,
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbours who are poor.
Amen.

[A Franciscan Benediction]

The Signpost

John 1: 35-39

The historians who have written about 1st Century BC speak about a common expectation that many people had of a Messiah who would free the Jewish nation from the occupation of the Romans. John the Baptist was seen as one such figure. He attracted literally thousands of people to hear him preach and he inspired them to make changes to their lives. He challenged them to turn away from being self absorbed and begin to live in expectation of a new world order. He talked about a coming leader who would turn everything upside down. On one occasion he pointed Jesus out as the chosen one of God. All over the world people are exploited, living in fear, searching for an alternative way to live. They too need people who are signposts pointing them to see Jesus in the everyday streets of Paris or Baghdad.

Prayer:

Lord,
teach me how to be a signpost.
A silent witness
to your grace.
Help me keep silent
in order that you can be heard.
Help me stay in the background
so others can spend time in your presence.
Amen.

The Gift of Love

Corinthians 13:7

Being persistent, never giving up – how easy is that?

When it means sacrificing our own time, comforts, even ways of living, is it worth persisting when we don't know if the effort will have the right result?

Loving can be hard work, and so can having faith, being hopeful and patient.

This is a serious challenge.

Prayer:

Loving God, your persistence is our model but yet it often seems so far beyond our abilities to replicate.

Your love persists no matter how we choose to listen or act.

Help us to keep going even in the face of apathy and opposition.

Strengthen our faith, fill us with hope and renew our patience so that we might be loving followers of Jesus today and every day.

Amen.

Eureka moments

Luke 2: 41-52

Some stories in the New Testament spell out 'eureka moments' when individuals discover faith in Jesus for themselves. These 'eureka moments' still exist today. All over the world individuals of all ages are discovering for themselves moments of revelation where they move from being passive believers in Jesus to becoming modern day disciples.

Christianity is more than simply adopting a lifestyle - it's much more! It's about discovering the very thing we didn't know we've been searching for all our lives - to know we are loved by our creator and that he longs for us to call him Father. In other words Christianity invites us to develop a relationship with God. Jesus becomes our 'bridge over troubled water' leading us into the heart of God. He becomes the door through which we enter into the presence of God. In our reading today Mary has a eureka moment.

Prayer:

Lord, our world is overwhelmed. Grief and panic fill the air.
Everywhere people are searching. Looking for the lost.
We are all living in a war zone.
For some it is very visible. For others it's invisible.
While bombs explode, children literally die.
For others families implode and relationships die.

Lord

Hear our prayers today as we pray for
Families separated by mental or physical war
Friends divided by literal or psychological walls of fear
Enemies searching for peace
Give us all the sustenance to keep on searching, to move beyond ourselves.
Lord be our bridge,
from death to life,
from fear to faith,
from hate to love,
from despair to hope

Come Lord

reveal yourself to your people.
Give to each of us a 'eureka moments'
to share with others - we have found the Messiah.
Amen.

The Gift

1 Corinthians 13:13 – 14

Faith – an outdated idea or a divisive concept in our 21st century world, or the source of much good?

Hope – so difficult to hang on to in a troubled world where many can see nothing positive in the future, but essential for human wellbeing.

Love – patient, kind, truthful, persistent, eternal, universal, personal, faithful, hopeful ...

Prayer:

Loving God, thank you for a love that goes beyond words, that speaks through other people, through your Word in scripture and in Jesus.

In this season help us to take time to ponder all the ways your love impacts our lives.

Help me to show and share your love generously and unselfishly – to be the hands, eyes, ears and mouth of Jesus – ‘Love all lovely, Love divine’ today and every day.

Amen.

The Star Man Searching

John 1: 19-39

When David Bowie died, over four million tweets flooded into Twitter acknowledging his contribution to music and art. His life and work had touched the lives of many including even the Archbishop of Canterbury.

At the heart of a great deal of Bowie's work was a spirit of searching, a longing to find another world to which to belong. In a number of interviews Bowie acknowledged his search to know God and indeed to find himself. It is surely this honesty that made him an engaging figure with many people.

Are we not all searching and it is this common search that makes us vulnerable and human. While Jesus wasn't the man who fell to earth, he was God come to earth engaging with our search and inviting us to look for his Kingdom.

Prayer:

Lord,

You made us inquisitive people.

Free to think. Free to choose. Free to live.

Somewhere along the line our freedom has become our prison.

We've got tangled up in ourselves. In our space. In our own importance.

Hiding behind our masks. Covering our shame. Wearing fig leaves, we pretend to be free.

Forgive us, Lord,

We've lost the mystery, the beauty, the Eden, the plot.

But we've discovered the way back.

Thank you for the new Adam, the new man - Jesus.

The light of the world, the bright and morning Star.

Lord,

You've made us inquisitive people

You've made us to be more than a dark star.

Amen.

In search of a faith that works

Isaiah 58: 5-9

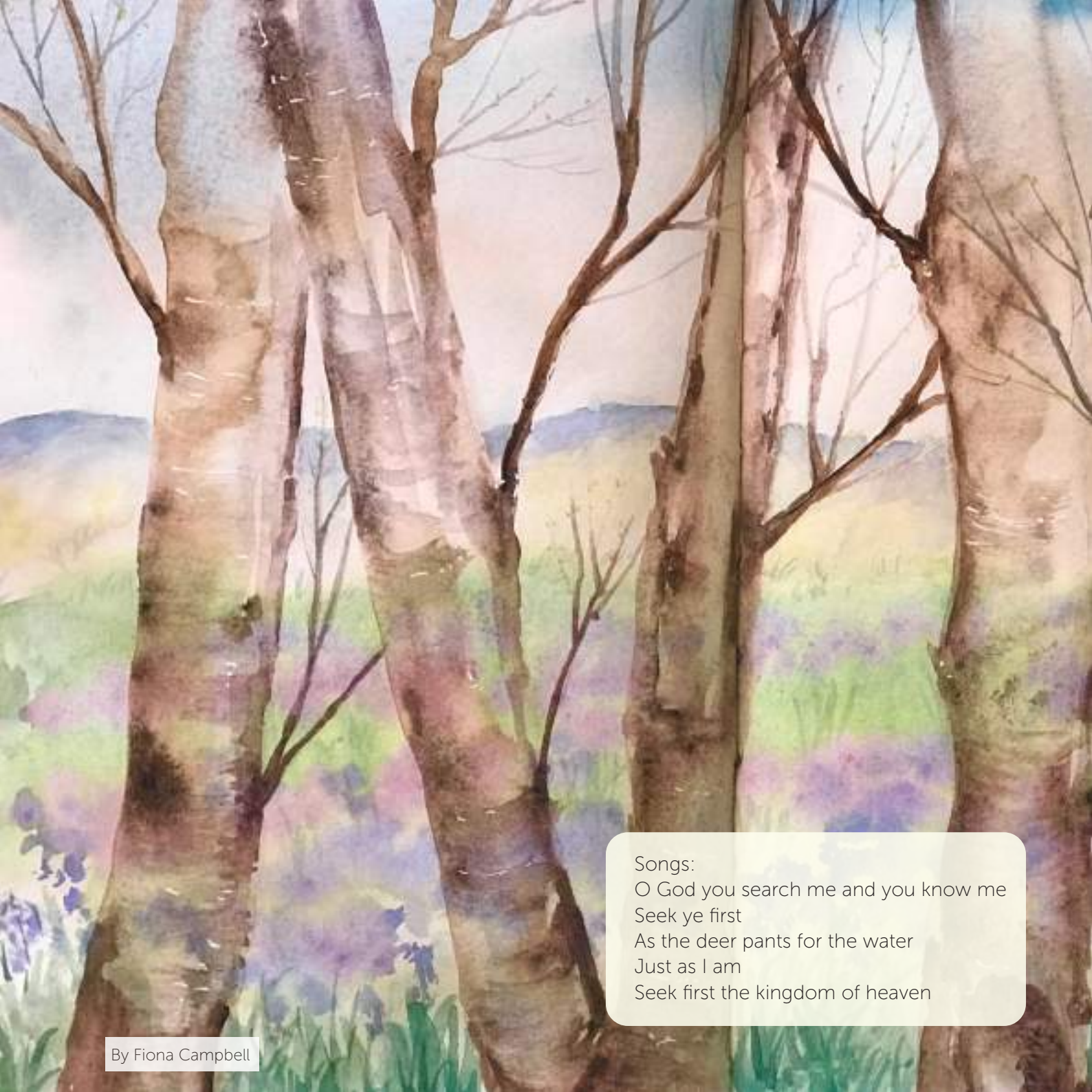
It is easy to think of worship as some mechanical duty, something self-serving that is only for our own well-being. Here Isaiah points to worship, in this case to people fasting, as a means simply to call God's attention to themselves; it is all about THEM and it is for their advantage and benefit. It is more about the usefulness of God. The result is injustice. They neglect their neighbour and deny others access to what resources life - sharing bread, sharing houses and sharing clothing. God desires devotion that spills over in acts and deeds of solidarity with others in their need. This is a faith that works.

(We repeat the prayer from the start of this week's theme.)

Prayer:

May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.
May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.
May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbours who are poor.
Amen.

[A Franciscan Benediction]



Songs:
O God you search me and you know me
Seek ye first
As the deer pants for the water
Just as I am
Seek first the kingdom of heaven

Making Sense Of It...

The New Year is often a time of reassessment. After the feasting of Christmas and Hogmanay we can find ourselves wanting to get fitter and healthier. The temptation of a crisp new calendar seems to promise a fresh start in other ways: a chance to reboot, restart, relaunch a 'new' you. These attempts are often comically doomed to failure. We write long colour coded lists and set unrealistic expectations and are surprised when we crash and burn, when our resolutions become... less resolved... But sometimes the new initiatives stick, January 1st may be an arbitrary time to start something but it's better than 'maybe tomorrow' or 'probably next week' and far better than 'some day' or 'one day'.

At this time of year, when many of us are wanting to work on our fitness and our habits, perhaps it would be stimulating to read our Bible mindful of our bodies and our senses. As we re-tune physically we can re-tune spiritually, open to new ways in which ancient texts might speak to us. There are many, many valid ways of reading scripture – it is such a dense, rich collection – but often we come to it in pretty similar ways, noticing the same kind of things.

As you read think: what could these people see, taste, smell? Think about how what you read affects how you feel, and what you sense. We also want to think about more than the big five senses – we have many more than five – our bodies pick up on time, temperature, balance, music!

Isaiah 43: 1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush[a] and Seba in your stead.
Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

[a] that is, the upper Nile region

Theatre of Faith – Stage Pyrotechnics

Isaiah 43: 1-7

The stage is set, the drama of life unfurls and attention is drawn to the fire and flood.

When the pantomime villain enters stage left the scene is often set with emerald green light and the flash of pyrotechnics at the front of the stage. The flash and the bang draw the attention and it feels as if all that matters is the villain and their dastardly deeds. As the chorus of boos ring out we are aware of the predicament of our hero and have no idea how they might survive the latest act of treachery.

So in life, the fires, the flashes and the bangs, draw our attention. The metaphorical fires, and sometimes the very real fires, that rage through life can leave a situation where you have no idea how you might overcome it. However it is then that the words of the Prophet Isaiah should ring in our ears.

It is time to move away from the pantomime response to the mess of life and move on from simple boos and anger to realising that there is more. Isaiah tells us that God will be with us as “we walk through the fire.” We know that we have the company of God in the face of the panto baddies, but also in the very real trials and tribulations of life; and that we will, as the hero always does, prevail in the face of whatever is in front of us.

Prayer:

Dear God,

as the pyro-flashes of life burn around us, help us to remember that you are with us in life. Guide us as we travel and remind us that we travel with you, and we need not be afraid for you are with us.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith – Get your lines right

Psalm 29

The music is captivating and the scenery is a delight. You are captivated by the predicament facing the characters in the play but you don't know who is going to stand up and be the one who saves the villagers from their terrible fate. It is getting close to the interval and you are aware that someone is going to have to step forward, and then up steps the hero. You always knew they were going to because they are at the top of the billing, but within the play this is where they make their mark. They stand on a well-positioned box and speak. Their words matter, you can tell in the way they are speaking that they have the knowledge and the power to do what is needed.

In the 29th Psalm we hear the Psalmist put forward the description of the voice of God. We hear what the voice of God is like, we hear of the strength of God's voice and that it can change the world in so many different ways. At the end of the psalm we are told what this strong and powerful voice will be used for, we hear the point of strength and power. We hear what God does with his voice and what is needed for us, and what we are to do with our own voices.

"The Lord gives strength to his people, and the Lord blesses them with peace."

Prayer:

Help us to use our voice for peace, wherever we have a say and wherever our voice is heard.
Help us to bring about your kingdom of peace and justice here on earth.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith – The Director

Acts 8: 14-17

Imagine you are part of the play, you are on stage, you know the words you have to say, you know the cast around you know their lines too; but somehow... you don't know what is happening, something is missing. You just stand there, waiting. You each take turns in saying your lines and you leave the stage. If you did this the performance would be completely flat, the reviews would be dreadful and nobody would want to come and see the play, let alone be part of it.

However, with the right guidance and direction a play of any sort, even one with no dialogue at all, can be made to come alive. In the Theatre of Faith the Holy Spirit acts as our director, the breath of life that fills the performance with hope, joy and peace. As a performer you know the performance will be better when you seek out good direction, and so it is with life and Holy Spirit. When you come alive, when you are engaging and believable, that is when you are full of the Holy Spirit. When you live in a way that attracts because of the believable love you show, that is when you have listened to the director.

Prayer:

Dear God,

fill us with your Holy Spirit, and give us direction in how we should live out our lives. Give us direction in how we might be alive in your Spirit and engaging in how we show love and acceptance to all your people.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith – Immersed in the story

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

There is a strange feeling when the curtain falls on a play that has carried you away. You have found yourself so immersed in the narrative that you have lost all sense of time and reality and you have been so gripped that something has changed in you. You could almost feel the actors' hearts beat when tension rose, and when that tension broke you ached with relief.

Being fully immersed in the story changes things; feeling the story washing over you and saturating your very being is a rare and wonderful response. In the narrative of John baptising people you can feel the anticipation building for what is to come. The drama of salvation and redemption is coming and the story of life is writ large. Christ is then baptised, the Holy Spirit comes and God speaks from the Heavens. Those who witness it are drawn in, and the baptism, the immersion completely in the Spirit of God, is complete. We are drawn into the activity of God, called to join God in loving the world; it changes something in us as we are invited to be fully immersed in the story. We find ourselves immersed to the point our perception changes and we live in a new way.

Prayer:

Dear God,

immerse us in your spirit, and saturate us in your love. Help us to see the world in a new way, a way that frees us to be your actors here on earth, sharing your love with all people.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith – Suspending Disbelief

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

What is going on? The play is entering an odd place and our hero is having an existential crisis and needs to learn a crucial lesson about themselves and the people they represent. Something needs to happen and it needs to happen quickly. It might be that the play enters a dream sequence or something happens that doesn't appear to make any sense.

At the point the prophet Ezekiel has a vision, and finds himself in the Valley of the Dry Bones, he is at a crisis point. The people of Israel are done for and all hope for the future appears to have gone, however, the vision that Ezekiel has is dramatic and it makes a clear point. The vision is strange and other worldly and requires the belief in how things normally work to be suspended. This vision casts a valley of dry bones coming back to life and points Ezekiel to hope for a future based in God.

In the Theatre of Faith it sometimes feels as if we have to take a step into something that is beyond normal reality, but that is the point. With God the unbelievable can be made believable and the seemingly impossible can become possible.

Prayer:

When we can see no way of challenging and changing earthly problems help us to suspend our disbelief.

Help us to remember that with you anything is possible and even a valley of dry bones can come back to life and dance.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith - It all makes sense

Proverbs 29: 18

The final scene of a play can often appear to be ridiculously formulaic. The hero takes time to explain to the people on stage all the actions that have led to this point, pulling together plot lines and narrative arcs with pin point precision in a way that wouldn't happen in real life. However, without this seemingly strange theatrical trope many people would leave theatres up and down the land confused as to how anything happened and disgruntled at not finding out whether or not the "will they won't they" love interests got together. In all of this, of course, the most important revelation is the murderer in murder mystery plays.

Without revelation our play would be frustrating and we would not understand half of what had happened and the same is true in the Theatre of Faith. Revelation of God is found in many places and not just a potentially obvious summing up at the end. Through the histories and prophecies of the Old Testament to the Gospels and letters of the New Testament, the Bible in its completeness reveals the drama of the Theatre of Faith to us, with the narrative arc returning to one of justice and love that favours the marginalised and oppressed. Alongside the Bible, the traditions of the Church and the wonders of creation can also teach us of God. The beauty and intricacy of nature and the desire of the Church to always open her doors further give us a better understanding of God.

The Revelation of God to each one of us happens in a different way but in all who encounter it there is a response that changes the way we live.

Prayer:

Dear God,

reveal yourself to us, open our hearts to hear of your love for us and all people. Help us to respond to your revelation to us and then share it with the world.

Amen.

Theatre of Faith – Leave dreaming

Joel 2: 28-32

A good play will change how you see yourself. A very good play will change how you see other people. A great play will change how you see the world.

Great theatre does that, it has the ability to open our eyes through different ways to a greater understanding of ourselves, each other and the world that we share. And once our eyes have been opened to what is possible then we can look into the world and dream dreams of how we can make it a better place.

In giving his prophecy Joel, acting as the mouthpiece of God, says that in the face of judgement and destruction God will give visions and dreams to the young and old, and men and women will all play their part in looking to the future. The time Joel spoke of was then, and now, and still to come; and the words spoken apply to all times on earth. Where love and justice are not the main stage directions in people's lives God, through Joel, tells us that this has to change. And that this change will come about through the Holy Spirit guiding people in speaking out for change and dreaming of a more just and merciful life both now and in the future.

In the Theatre of Faith we watch the play, and in doing so find ourselves immersed in it, and as we leave we find ourselves dreaming and looking forward, with a vision of a new way of doing things. A new way that is based in love and justice and showing God's bias for the outsider and those on the margins.

Prayer:

Dear God,

help us to dream dreams and cast visions, visions of a better and brighter world where justice and peace flow like rivers and hope and inclusion are a way of life.

Amen.



Songs:

One more step along the world I go

Be thou my vision

Be still

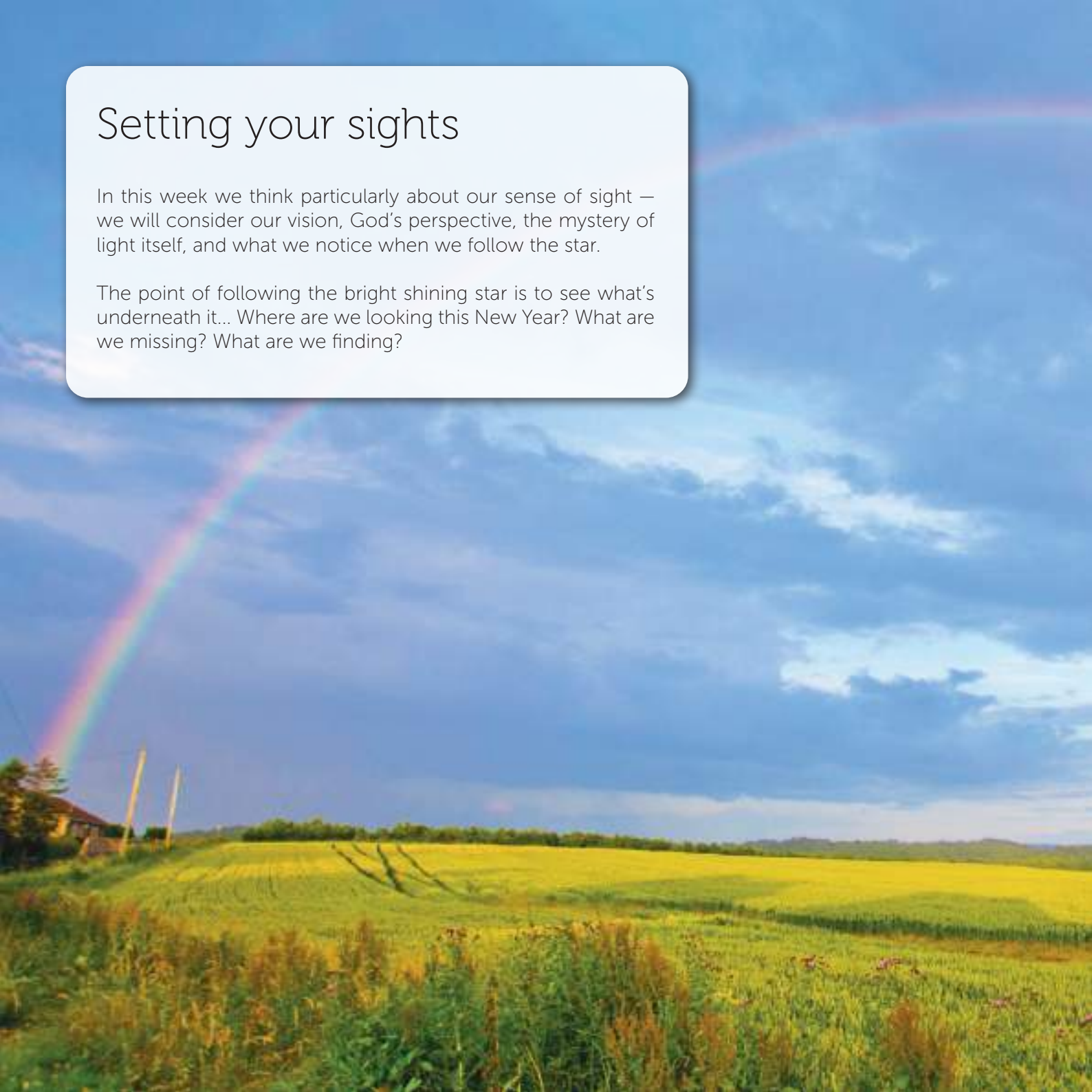
Make me a channel of your peace

It is well with my soul

Setting your sights

In this week we think particularly about our sense of sight — we will consider our vision, God's perspective, the mystery of light itself, and what we notice when we follow the star.

The point of following the bright shining star is to see what's underneath it... Where are we looking this New Year? What are we missing? What are we finding?





Isaiah 60: 1-6

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

A compelling vision

Jeremiah 31: 8-14

The start of a new year feels like a good time to look to the future and wouldn't it be nice to have, like this passage in Jeremiah describes, a bright and shining future vision? A vision where paths are smooth and everyone, even those who are vulnerable, are welcome.

It's not often we can start the year with these things to look forward to, perhaps it is why we look to ourselves instead. A smaller project, one we can stand in front of a mirror and picture. But this year I challenge you to look beyond that reflection. Look to your house, your community, our world in 2020, with the hopeful vision of Jeremiah and the people who heard him and rejoiced.

However your new year has started — whether with sorrow or joy, uncertainty or clarity of view — let's create a vision we can all look forward to. Then step by step, let's make that vision a reality.

Prayer:

Visionary God,
You can see further than we can imagine.
Gift us with your eyes to see the world as you would like it to be.
Lend us your strength to help that vision become real.
Help us also to look after the person in the mirror.
Amen.

Light in the dark

Isaiah 60: 1-6

You are not as you see yourself.

You are as God sees you.

Isaiah in this reading is writing about a vision of Zion but as one of God's people the role he is talking about applies to you too. You are not a city but you do have the power and the possibility to reflect the light of God into the world. When you fill yourself with God and the Spirit you shine like any city of Zion and those around you cannot fail to see the change. Kings may not come to you, and in fact you might be quite glad about that because life is busy enough without making sandwiches for royalty; but those whose value in God's eyes is greater than kings might come to you. People who need help or love or grace might come to you, drawn to the light in you which your human eyes cannot see but that souls can see and cry out for. A light that brightens the darkness.

Prayer:

Bright and shining God,
we cannot see ourselves shine, we are limited to a more human view.
Help us please, to trust in your light from Jesus birth to our own existence and beyond.
Bring us the ability to be your light in this world.
Amen.

God's way of looking

Psalm 147: 12-20

Sight is a sense we often put a lot of faith in: "Seeing is believing", "Pics or it didn't happen."

But we also know that so much of what we 'see' is our brains trying to make sense of the world around us. We can see things which others can't and vice versa. Which is why I enjoy poetry and imagery like we see in this psalm.

Our God is a creative God; when we look at art in amazement or confusion, we cannot hope to see what God sees when looking at our art and our world. Is it any wonder that when psalmists are inspired by God the images they produce take us out of ourselves and our ordinary way of seeing? This new year, when things around us might not seem to have room for creativity or inspiration, let us remember God's way of looking and let the wonder, the surprise, and the artistry back in.

Prayer:

Creative God,
remind us to see your world and your actions with more than our eyes.
When we feel crushed or limited give us your inspiration again.
Fill us with wonder and delight at every possible moment.
Amen.

Ephesians 1: 13-14

We have been marked, says Paul.

Are we branded like cattle in the old days with the mark of their master? Or perhaps like newer brands in the present: logos shining from our clothing, shopping and electronic devices; singing out for all to see to whom we owe our capitalist allegiance.

I'm not sure how I feel about being marked, by any of these things, or by God. I spent a fair amount of my life trying to hide my faith in plain sight from colleagues or friends. So have I been outed? Was I ever even as incognito as I like to think? Probably the answer is both yes and no. I haven't been branded like cattle by God and, unless I choose to wear a symbol day to day, I am not claimed outwardly by the 'logos' of Christ. But I am different since I heard and believed as an adult. To some it will have been evident in where they saw me start to spend my time, to some it will have been in the things they saw me taking time to do better or the people I took time to know more.

So perhaps the mark of God on us is visible after all but it is not one of which we need to be afraid.

Prayer:

God,

You mark us with your promise and your ways.

You mark us with your love and your grace.

Please teach us to see your mark in others and be proud to show it off in ourselves.

Amen.

Open to the light

John 1: 1-13

In this well loved passage John is talking about Jesus being the light of the world. That light, he says as his Gospel goes on, is not just to shine at the beginning of the world or for only those who met him on earth and heard the witness of his coming, but to all, in whatever dark place we find ourselves. The people Jesus knew on earth were indeed in a dark place, a place of subjugation under a power they had not chosen. Jesus came to help them see the light and in turn to reflect that light to others.

Light reflects over and over until it shows us things we could never have otherwise seen. John's confidence in Jesus is just one reflection of God's light bringing hope into our lives, even in the moments where we would prefer not to see more clearly. In those and in all moments we can ask the Spirit to come alongside us and remind us that God's vision and light are stronger than anything that the light might uncover.

Prayer:

God of light,
You sent Jesus to help people living in darkness.
You send your Spirit to us now in the same way.
Help us not to close our eyes to the light you bring, whatever hard things it illuminates.
Amen.

Precious in our sight

Psalm 72: 10-14

"Precious is their blood in his sight." I love this phrase from the psalmist both for its poetry and for its reality. Visible blood is not a pretty sight, usually it comes from violence or from pain. And when it involves women it is often taboo despite its life giving qualities. Blood gives life to all of us and, especially when it stays in our veins, it is very precious to our bodies and our continued existence. It is important to science and medicine, we can even give blood to help those who have lost it by some misfortune or accident: a life giving gift.

But what about the blood of others while it pumps through their hardworking veins and hearts? It is easy for many to say that blood is precious: blood of family ties, the people we often hold dear. But think of the people around you, those you may not even know, the ones who annoy you. Is their blood precious to you too? Of course we don't wish harm on people but do we hold them as precious?

God does. The psalmist sings out God will rescue them, take pity on them, save them! Who are we to do otherwise?

Prayer:

God of blood ancient and flowing,
Teach us to look beyond our own blood ties and those ties which feel as close as blood.
Give us the sight to see all blood as precious, just as you do.
Task us with the rescue of your precious people from the violent blood loss humans cause
both near and far.

Amen.

Follow the light

Matthew 2: 1-12

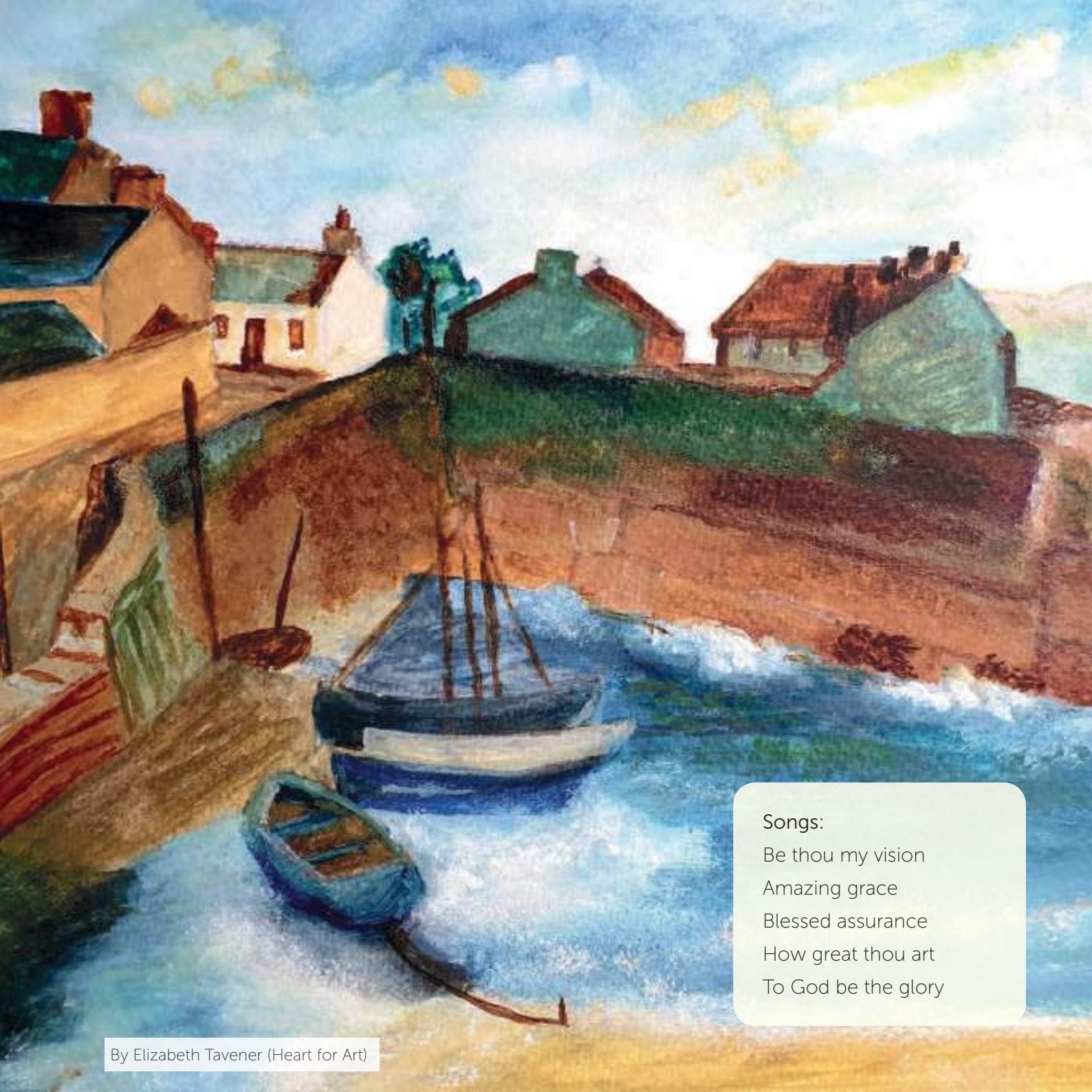
The wise folk who came to find Jesus all those years ago were both very wise and not at all. They saw in the sky a star and using their knowledge and faith were able to interpret it to mean that a great person would be born. They came a long way to find Jesus; who knows if they started together or wound up together but by the time they reached Jerusalem there will likely have been a lot of them. Our sweet nativity scenes with three men in crowns and a single camel are not the most realistic image of what it would take to go on such a journey. It would have looked more like a strange family trip or a trade delegation, off to meet a new power in the world. They looked carefully at the star but even with their wisdom they did not see everything they needed to, speaking too openly to the vicious Herod. As a result Herod killed many children and Jesus became a refugee.

We are not those wise folks and we probably don't have a star to follow across the world to see a baby, but we can take something from their quest and journey into our own lives. A light of possibility entered their sights and they did not turn away, they didn't think 'Oh that's too hard and too far,' they said 'Yes God, I will go to you'. They found what was under the star and worshipped.

What are we looking at this new year as we start to return to the rhythms of life? Is there a shimmer of possibility that you have been meaning to grasp? A shining sign which you need an extra nudge to follow and look underneath? For although the wise folks did not get everything right as they journeyed, they took the leap and God leapt with them, into a plan that they could never have foreseen and a life filled with wonder as they stared at that little baby.

Prayer:

God of stars and wonder,
help us to follow you wherever you lead.
Show us the possibility you hold for our lives.
Please give us the strength, help and wisdom we need to fulfil it.
Keep us in your story God, guide us to your side.
Amen.



Songs:

Be thou my vision

Amazing grace

Blessed assurance

How great thou art

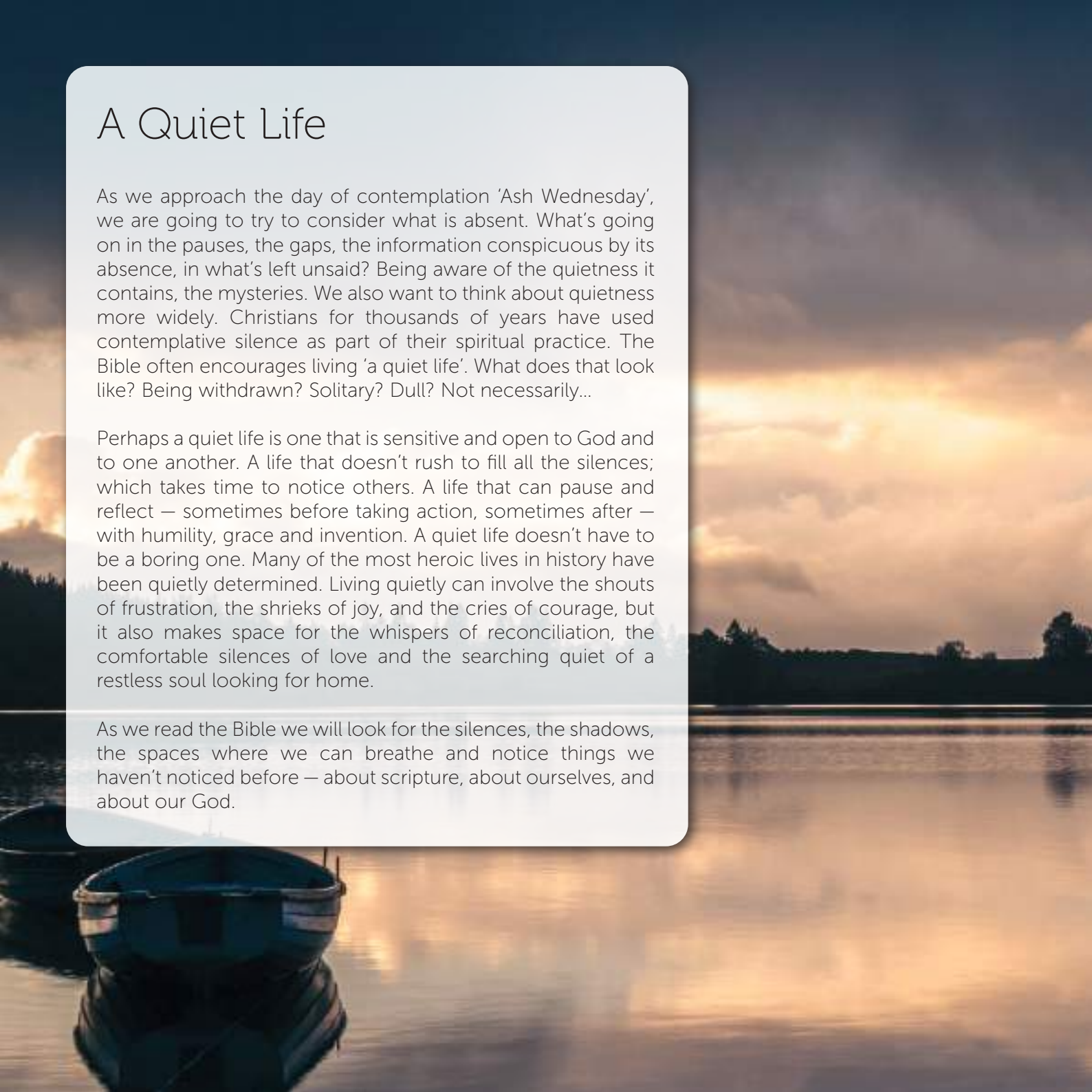
To God be the glory


A Quiet Life

As we approach the day of contemplation 'Ash Wednesday', we are going to try to consider what is absent. What's going on in the pauses, the gaps, the information conspicuous by its absence, in what's left unsaid? Being aware of the quietness it contains, the mysteries. We also want to think about quietness more widely. Christians for thousands of years have used contemplative silence as part of their spiritual practice. The Bible often encourages living 'a quiet life'. What does that look like? Being withdrawn? Solitary? Dull? Not necessarily...

Perhaps a quiet life is one that is sensitive and open to God and to one another. A life that doesn't rush to fill all the silences; which takes time to notice others. A life that can pause and reflect — sometimes before taking action, sometimes after — with humility, grace and invention. A quiet life doesn't have to be a boring one. Many of the most heroic lives in history have been quietly determined. Living quietly can involve the shouts of frustration, the shrieks of joy, and the cries of courage, but it also makes space for the whispers of reconciliation, the comfortable silences of love and the searching quiet of a restless soul looking for home.

As we read the Bible we will look for the silences, the shadows, the spaces where we can breathe and notice things we haven't noticed before — about scripture, about ourselves, and about our God.





Micah 6: 7-8

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly[a] with your God.

[a] or prudently

Rumpelstiltskin

Micah 6: 7-8

I always found it a little bit strange that the miller's daughter in the fairytale Rumpelstiltskin was willing to promise her future first born child to the imp in order that he might spin straw into gold for her. Of course, the alternative was to have her head cut off by the king, so I suppose the pressure was on.

In the end she not only marries the king — who clearly felt that gold-spinning was a useful quality in a wife — but also manages to outwit Rumpelstiltskin and keep her child. So perhaps she knew what she was doing. Or perhaps, as the king moved her from room to room, giving her ever more straw, she simply got used to the idea of the stakes getting higher and higher to the point where she was willing to risk anything and anyone.

The prophet Micah slices through this kind of escalating clamour in Israel with a call to simplicity. God's demands are not complicated, he says. Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly.

Prayer:

First a necklace

Then a ring

Then a child

The clamour in my head says you want more from me, God. Always more.

More words, more offerings, more apologies, more bargains.

But what if you want less? What if it really is that simple?

Act justly. One action, then two.

Love mercy. One heartbeat, then two.

Walk humbly. One footstep, then two.

No straw. No gold. No ever escalating demands.

Just a quiet dance of obedience.

The story of a boy who went forth to learn fear

Psalm 111: 10

There is an odd, not very well known, fairytale in the Brothers Grimm's collection called 'The story of a boy who went forth to learn fear.' The tale unfolds of a young man who sets out to learn to 'shudder', or feel fear. In spite of being faced with all manner of frightening things, he continues on his fearless — and damaging — way. In the end his exasperated new wife pours freezing water over him, enabling him to 'shudder' but still without fear. He remains unable to connect actions with consequences, unable to learn or to grow. Absolute fearlessness is not bravery, but sociopathy. Fear enables us to learn and mature, to become responsible, courageous and loving.

Prayer:

Almighty God,
for many of us, fear comes at night, when all is still and quiet and there is no activity to distract us.
Fear is not something we welcome. Its spiky lessons are not ones we wish to learn.
Yet without fear, we hurt ourselves and others. Without fear, we cannot take responsibility for our choices. Without fear we cannot love, because to love is to risk loss.
You do not wish us to be frightened, Lord, but you do wish us to be free to love and learn.
And so,
blessed are the fearful, who recognise the power of your works, for they shall know what it is to be tucked beneath your wings.
Blessed are the anxious, who lie awake in the quiet hours of the night, for they shall be fed by your promises.
Blessed are the timid, who are unsure of their worth, for they shall remember your wonders, and know that your grace and compassion cover them.
Amen.

1 Thessalonians 4: 9-12

Hansel and Gretel, some argue, is a fairytale which teaches children not merely to be cautious about strangers offering sweets, but also how to be independent and self-reliant. Abandoned in the forest, the children search for food. In desperation they succumb to the temptation offered by the witch's gingerbread house. They are punished for this dependence with capture, but recover enough self-reliance to escape from and kill the witch. One problem with this argument is that Hansel and Gretel are not precisely independent, instead they are mutually dependent on each other.

Self-reliance can be a useful quality. Paul advises the Thessalonians to lead a quiet life, minding their own business, being independent and thus winning the respect of others. But crucially, Paul's advice is based on the awareness that those he addresses are securely based in the interdependence of a loving family of God.

Prayer:

Lord, sometimes I long for a quiet life.

A life in which I am a bother to nobody and nobody bothers me.

I am happy to 'mind my affairs'. I am not interested in the affairs of others, and why should they be interested in me?

Do no harm. Make no waves. Draw no-one's attention. Depend on no-one but yourself.

Is that a quiet life, or an empty one?

I think, perhaps, your quietness is richer than that.

I think a quiet life with you means not the quiet of the cell, but the quiet of still waters, waters teeming with life and connection. Mutually dependent, nurturing each other, held within your stillness and calm.

Lord, lead me by still waters and re-connect my soul with all that lives.

Amen.

Ever hope

Exodus 14: 10-14

I would be one of the ones shouting at Moses. Can you imagine? However harsh life was in Egypt, your new life is not delivering what you thought it promised. Can you picture the uncertainty and fear? Would you have the courage and faith to stand firm, as Moses tells you?

When she was younger, our Labrador, Meg, used to have a pink blanket she carried around with her everywhere. It had been on the girls' beds when they were tiny, but Meg would take it to bed; walk in the garden with it and stand on it while she ate. The amount of comfort and confidence it gave was bewildering. It was a sad day when it became just too smelly for words and it had to go.

It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that our faith is like the dog's comfort blanket — that we can wrap ourselves up in prayer, or bible reading, or worship, or social action and we will go through life with that cosy, rosy glow that never fades. It comes like a hammer blow when life is not like that; when we encounter set-back, challenge or disaster.

But we are not promised a comfort blanket. God calls us to trust him in the storm as well as in the calm. I know there have been times where only my faith got me through. It allowed me to stand firm. It wasn't comfortable and it certainly wasn't cosy. But the more tumultuous the time, the closer I have felt my walk with God. I stood firm in His grace. Even if I didn't know it, he was fighting for me. Never fear. Ever hope.

Prayer:

Father God, when I face the storm, help me to know that you are my life-raft. When the very ground of my life shakes, help me to see that you are my firm foundation. When my body shakes with fear, come and hold me firm through the love of your Son and the power of your Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Lights in the world

Matthew 5: 13-20

Eight verses. Eight profound, content-rich verses of the most beautiful, inspiring outpouring of theology ever. Matthew records content so dense it is difficult to know where to start any kind of meaningful commentary.

But two things stand out...

I once spoke at a conference at Keble College, Oxford. The chapel there has the famous painting by Holman Hunt of Jesus as The Light of the World. It's a striking and enigmatic portrait of a man with a beard, holding a lamp, knocking on a door. The door has no handle. It needs to be opened from the inside.

This is the first thing — Jesus is often described as “the Light of the World”. But here, he describes his listeners and his followers as “the Light of the World”. The message is clear — if we get alongside Jesus, crediting Him for who He is — something of us becomes a little Christ-like. We might be a flickering pocket torch to Jesus' lighthouse but, nevertheless, we are contributing to the coming Kingdom of God.

But wait — there's a sting. We don't get to heaven unless we are more righteous than the pharisees, those bastions of religious conservatism and legalism of Jesus' day. What chance do we stand if those who devote themselves to Godly obedience aren't good enough? So, here's the second thing — and it's left unsaid here by Jesus. If we think we can earn our way to heaven through our own actions then we are on a hiding to nothing. If we think we can out-pharisee the pharisees, we may have a disappointment.

The thing Jesus has done is to make us righteous with God through His actions for us. We could never make ourselves righteous without the Cross. With Jesus' sacrifice we need not worry. We are freed from guilt and worry and our lights can shine.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, shine in our lives and make us shine ever brighter for you. Use our light to unmask places where injustice or fear live and help us play our part in bringing your love where it is needed.

Amen.

2 Peter 1: 16-21

Today we retreat to a quiet, isolated mountain slope, where further astonishing truth is revealed. Peter, who calls himself a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, relates his eye witness account of the time when he and his two friends were given a glimpse of the full nature of Jesus. He tells of the time on the mountainside when Jesus' face shone like the sun, with clothes as white as light. He remembers back to the time when the outward appearance of Jesus matched the inward reality, that here was a man in whom the full majesty and glory of God was to be found, a son honoured and loved by God the Father. An astonishing truth which needed the quiet of a mountainside to allow those three friends space to begin to understand, and space to misunderstand.

Peter writes that the words of the prophets, of Scripture, make more sense and are more certain when there is more clarity about who Jesus is.

Sometimes we need space and time to explore the immensity of the mystery of who Jesus is and who he was to those eyewitnesses. Space and time to assimilate the enormous truths borne out by the witnesses to his life and those who wrote in advance about him.

But just as the morning star rises slowly and faithfully as the herald of each new dawn, unhurried as it hangs like a mercury dot in the changing palette of the day's new sky, so God gives our lifetime of daily rhythms for the truth of Christ to rise in our hearts and illuminate our lives. His slow, measured, faithful unchanging presence day by day gives plenty of time for us to ponder this mystery of the one who became flesh and lived among us, allowed us to see his glory, and to begin the journey of understanding the fullness of his grace and truth.

Prayer:

May Christ, the bright and morning star rise in our hearts today in all his constancy, faithfulness, luminosity and beauty.

Amen

Daring peace

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “There is no way to peace along the way to safety. For peace must be dared”.

The apostle Paul has dared peace. In his unsafe circumstances, brutal with beatings, imprisonments, hunger and hardships he has dared to make the adventurous discoveries of kindness, patience, understanding, sincere love. He dares to rejoice while feeling sorrowful, he dares to feel rich beyond measure while possessing nothing and dares to delight in pouring his life into poverty to make others’ lives full. He writes as a man deeply at peace.

He identifies the source of this peace as the very nub of the good news of the Gospel. He has been reconciled with God through Christ.

We cannot plumb the depths of the mystery that Jesus who was without sin should become sin for us. But we know the nature of reconciliation with God and we see the outworking in lives made peaceful. We hear the testimony of those who can express deep peace in the face of bereavement, illness and loss of all kinds. Across the globe we hear the stories of those who tell of unshakable peace, made strong in the face of persecution, imprisonment and abuse. We see the evidence of communities transformed where reconciliation is made between enemies and peace becomes the new culture.

All this because Christ dared for peace on our behalf. He chose the unsafe way of the cross, and what lay beyond, to achieve our own peace with God.

Prayer:

Jesus, you have made a safe place for us.
A resting place of reconciliation,
where the protecting walls are peace
and love is the haven.
Thank you.
Amen.



Songs:

Come and find the quiet centre
Make me a channel of your peace
Be still for the presence of the Lord
Be still and know that I am God
There's a quiet understanding

Complex Characters

The Bible is not full of perfect people doing perfect things but it is jam-packed with imperfect people doing crazy, strange, inspired, terrible, wonderful things. Today we are going to meet some of the Bible's most colourful and strange characters.

It's time to buckle in. You thought Albert Square was bad? Just wait...

Taking the list in Hebrews 11 as our starting point, we are going to get to know some of the Old Testament characters that struggled and doubted and managed to shoot themselves in the foot repeatedly, and yet were still able to achieve incredible things through God.

All these people were able to participate in God's unfolding plan without the hindsight we have of living after the resurrection of Jesus and in spite of all their limitations and baggage. God is able to work with our strengths and skills but also our flaws and weaknesses.

We are called to be counter-cultural complex characters...





Hebrews 11: 1-3

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Meet David... Saint or Sinner?

1 Samuel 16

David: A shepherd, yet a giant killer. A shepherd, but a mighty king. A musician and poet, yet a soldier. A king, yet a murderer. A married man, but an adulterer. A friend of God, yet a liar.

An ancestor of Jesus Christ. A man described by God as "a man who will obey".

What do you say he is, saint, sinner, or?

David is anointed King: "The Lord said to Samuel, 'Now take a horn of olive oil and go to Bethlehem and find a man named Jesse, for I have selected one of his sons to be the new King'".

Jesse's youngest son was tending the sheep; Samuel asked that Jesse send for him.

"Then the Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; he is the one'. So, Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the presence of his brothers and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came on David in power". (NIV 1 Samuel 16: 2,13)

David is described as one of the greatest characters in the Old Testament. He is remembered and respected for his Godliness but at the same time the Bible makes no effort to hide David's shortcomings, indeed they were part of who David was. He played out the journey of life with zest, getting it wrong so often but was always quick to ask God's forgiveness. David had an unchangeable belief in the faithful and forgiving nature of God and never took God's forgiveness lightly or his blessing for granted.

Perhaps that's why the Psalms David wrote are so true to the journey of life, so full of the joys and sorrows trials and triumphs which any one of us can experience at any time. David, saint and sinner but most importantly God's anointed! "A man who will obey".

Prayer:

Lord, in the fullness of joy may we give thanks.

In our thankfulness may we open our hearts to receive you.

As we receive you hold us gently in your care so that when things are hard we'll still know your presence.

Like David may we always know that you are indeed our God and Father.

Amen.

Meet Jonah: expert sulker

Jonah 4:2-3

It is said that God works in mysterious ways, but Jonah has a problem with God working in predictable ways.

God asks his prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell them to turn from their wicked ways or they will be overthrown. Jonah instead turns tail and flees in the opposite direction. He runs, sails, gets himself thrown overboard, swallowed by a big fish, forced into contemplation, spewed back up and eventually ends up back where he started: going to Nineveh like God asked him to.

Does this sound like an elaborate tantrum to anyone else?

It even has a 'time out' although the naughty step replacement leaves something to be desired.

Jonah may be a man and a prophet but he is acting like a toddler. It may be a little more extreme than 'please put your shoes on,' but God lives up to his role as Father and allows Jonah to throw a strop, see the error of his ways, come back and do the task he was asked to do. Like many a tantrum over the millennia, Jonah's comes from a place of not-yet-understanding. Jonah already knows God will not hurt the people of Nineveh if he can help it and sees only his embarrassment at the hands of God: that he will have to make a prophecy that won't come true.

Later God will help Jonah to understand but for now the task needs doing and Jonah's responsibility in Nineveh is not, as he might think, to be the bringer of punishment, but to be a catalyst for change. Jonah's role is to warn, and to hope that the warning is enough to help the city get back on track.

Prayer:

God help me to know my role in your plans.
I cannot see through your eyes,
I cannot understand all of your ways,
I do not possess the knowledge that you do.

Guide my feet and help me to trust you
with faith that one day I might understand.
Amen.

Meet Micah, contract lawyer...

Micah 6:1-8

When looking into Micah, I came across the 'covenant lawsuit' (Micah 6.1-8) where God sues Israel for breach of contract. The people have violated the covenant they had with God. If Micah is representing God and presenting his case then he's not just a prophet, he's a lawyer...

Lawyers sometimes hold a strange position in the public imagination. On the one hand they are respected professionals with access to levers of power, but on the other hand - like politicians and journalists - they are often treated with suspicion or made the butt of the joke. Part of this is a healthy tongue-in-cheek disrespect of authority figures, but there's also an underlying wariness of those in society who wade into the grey areas and have to make difficult judgement calls. Sometimes there is no easy road and yet they walk it for us. The services they offer are vital for a well functioning society, but as they ask individuals to negotiate conflict, compromise and complexity there is the fear that self-interest or ego will take over.

I've found it useful to think about prophets as lawyers - people with a certain status, who are listened to but sometimes distrusted, who have to walk a difficult line. They are people who speak uncomfortable truths, who can challenge power structures and shift public opinion. Their calling requires personal conviction but also the ability to withhold personal judgement.

So as we think about the lawyer Micah, let's remember all those called professionally to be Complex Characters - those who try to resolve disputes, hold power to account and negotiate peace.

Micah's Prayer:

Dear God,
help me,
hold me secure,
as I try to say as you say
tell as you tell
shout as you shout
whisper as you whisper.
Amen.

Meet Rahab, shrewd operator...

Joshua 2:4-6

Rahab negotiates with the spies, who are scouting the land before the invasion, to save her and her family in exchange for not handing them over to the authorities. She is impressed by what she's heard about these people and their God. She's a shrewd operator - judging the mood, and playing the cards she is dealt - but she's an unconventional hero, lying and acting out of self-preservation.

There are parallels between Rahab and the parable Jesus tells about 'the unjust steward' (see Luke 16.1-8). A man who has just been fired by his rich boss spends his notice period cutting favourable deals with all of the clients so that when he is back on the job market they will want to hire him. When the boss finds out - he isn't mad - he's delighted that his lazy steward is doing something. The parable ends with the line: "For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light".

Rahab and the unjust steward are puzzles. They act in unconventional, unexpected ways, thinking on their feet and improvising in the face of political and economical turmoil. Both suggest that rather than just removing yourself from the world - it is important to engage. As Christians we shouldn't just be boring and predictable but we should be alive to what God is doing in the world and be ready to act creatively under pressure.

Rahab's Prayer:

Dear God,
be my compass,
my lantern,
my star.

Amen.

Meet Isaiah, streaker...

Isaiah 20:1-6

When Isaiah responded to God's question "Who will I send and who will go for me?" by saying "Here am I, send me", I'm pretty sure he had no idea that one day God was going to ask him to take his clothes and his shoes off and wander around in public like that for three whole years!

In fact, I'm not sure many would sign up as followers of God if that was ever to appear in the job description!

Isaiah is not, however, the Biblical equivalent of the naked Rambler. There was a reason he was asked to do what he was asked to do.

It was all a question of trust.

God's people were looking to be rescued and they were hoping the neighbours would help. Isaiah could have launched into sermon mode and told the people that relying on others, especially other nations, was not the answer. God was the one they should trust. But instead of just telling them that, God asked Isaiah to show the people how foolish they were being – by wandering around naked.

I wonder...

I wonder if God was to ask me to do anything as wacky, would I be willing to do it?

And what does this particular episode say about Isaiah? To me, it screams from the rooftops that he was one truly remarkable man who really did put God first in his life. Before family, friends, even his own comfort and reputation.

But to be honest I hope it's something God never asks of me!

Prayer:

Father

You call us to work with you in spreading the good news.

To live it and show it.

To talk of it and embody it.

Where our actions tell a different story, please forgive us and implant in us the desire to want to trust you.

Wherever you take us. Whatever you ask of us.

Give us the courage on our faith journey to keep saying:

Here am I Lord, send me.

Amen.

Meet Moses...

Exodus 3:1-6

"Take off your sandals".

Whether you hear those words as an instruction or an invitation will tell you a lot about your attitude to God. You can hear them as an instruction, a warning that the ground that God inhabits is so holy that he wanted nothing on Moses' sandals to defile it. That is probably what the author of the story understood the words to mean.

But to me they stand more as an invitation. Take your sandals off, feel the ground beneath your feet. Let your toes curl in the sand. Ground yourself in the holiness of this place. The God Immanuel, the God with us, is not defiled by contact with us. We are sanctified by contact with him.

Of all our complex characters few came to God with a more complex past than Moses. Few were given more to do than Moses. To do it, he had to stand on the holy ground.

Take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground.

Prayer:

Lord God
Immanuel,
encountered
in desert places.
On barren mountain top.
Hard rock.
Sharp sand.
Let me take off my sandals
and stand on holy ground.

Amen

Meet Sarah Where geriatric meets maternity

Hebrews 11:11-12

We first meet Sarah in Genesis 12:5 when Abram takes her, his nephew Lot and all of his possessions and they follow God's call out of Haran. Abram was 75, Sarai (as she was known then) was 65. And that call to go came with promises of blessings, one of which would be that Abraham's descendants would be made into a nation. In 12:7 it becomes a promise of offspring who would inherit the land of Canaan.

In the years that follow Sarai follows where Abram goes, lets Abram pass her off as his sister twice to save his skin, and probably heard in those early promises that her womb would be filled. But years passed without a child. She tried to bring the promise to fruition herself – giving her slave girl Hagar to Abram and they conceived a son, but that didn't work out and still God's promise didn't come to fruition.

I wonder what Sarai faced, what she felt, what she uttered to God in those 25 years that passed before that promise was fulfilled... and greyed, aged and wrinkled she became known as Sarah And Mum.

... You might say she's a complex character.

Prayer:

Lord,

You call each of us to follow,
You take the most ordinary of us,
and use us in extraordinary ways to fulfil your promises.

Not in ways that we might expect,
and not in nice tidy timescales either.

For in our mess you see opportunity.

In our weakness your strength is known.

And in our brokenness your light shines through.

Take me Lord,

in all of my complexities and mould me so that my life might be a fertile place where the life that you offer to all is seen

Give me faith to trust.

Hope that endures.

And strength to persevere on the journey ...however long it takes.

Amen.



SONGS

One more step along the world I go
Be thou my vision
I the Lord of sea and sky
Will you come and follow me

What We Really Need

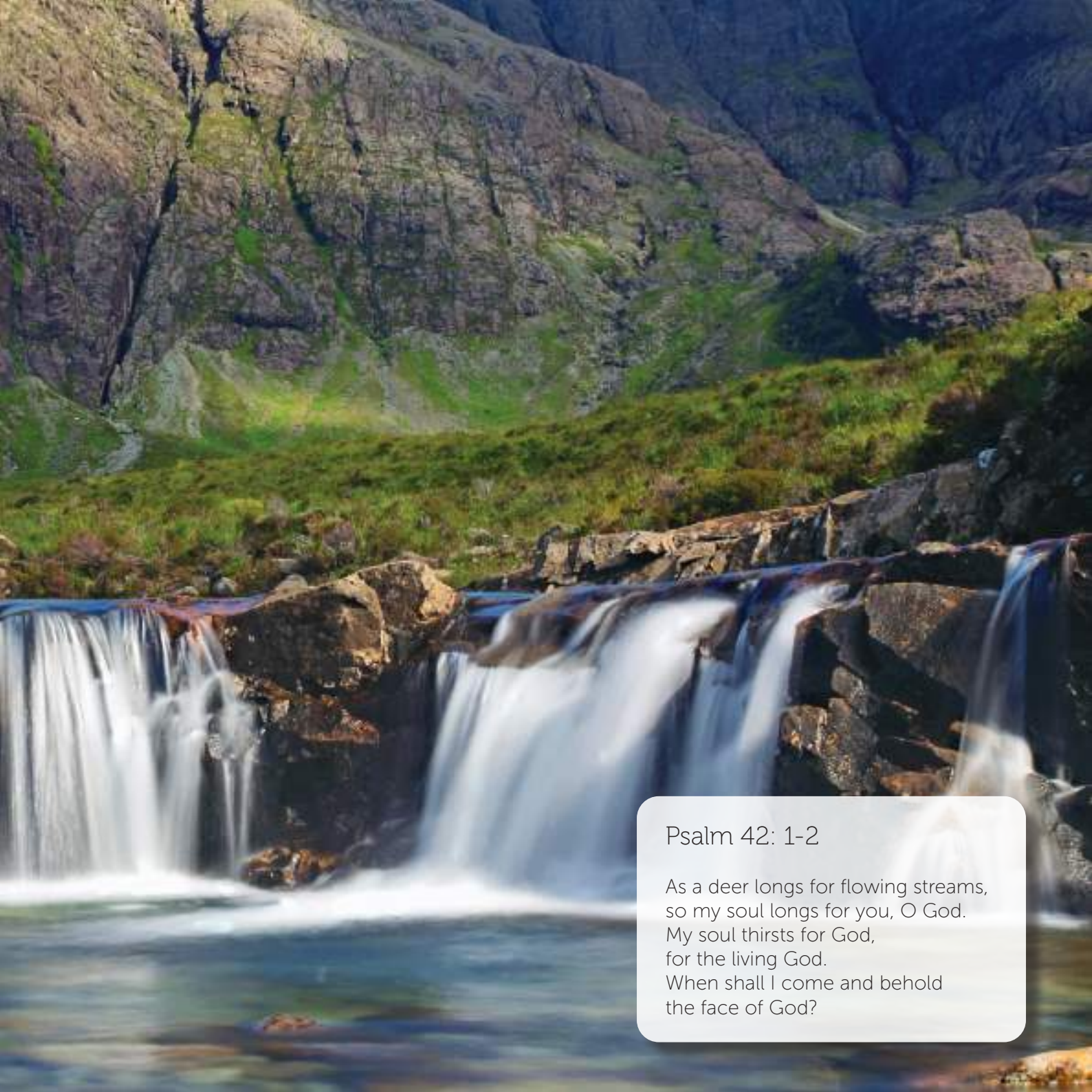
What do you really need?

Life is so complicated until it isn't — until it's just about the next breath, something to drink, somewhere to stay, or a community to belong to. That gasp of air, that cold glass of water, that roof, that place you can simply be.

What do we learn about our God from breathing deeply? Or from catching our breath? How about when we quench our thirst? Or when we feel safe? Or from when we lose that sense of security? As Jesus fasted in the desert wilderness, surely a dry and unforgiving place, these needs would have been on his mind. He was fully divine but yet — incredibly — also fully human. Jesus speaks with authority in our lives as one who knows what it is to fight for breath, to long for water, to be without a permanent address, to find oneself forsaken, betrayed and abandoned. But he also knows what it is to laugh, to drink in celebration, to share hospitality, and form lasting friendships.

What can we discover about our God and ourselves when we strip things down to the basics and consider our most fundamental needs?





Psalm 42: 1-2

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

Breath Brings Life

Genesis 2: 7

When my son was born I was in awe of this tiny precious life that I had helped to create. This tiny precious life that had grown inside of me, shared my blood, my food and my breath. This tiny precious life who had shared my joys, my love, my anger and my sorrows. This tiny precious life that had been my inner companion for nine warm months, a part of me...but... who wasn't me.

I had given life to this tiny precious life. As I held him in my arms I was filled with a love I had never known before. A love that filled every cell of my body. A love that...even though it encompassed my whole being...grew deeper and stronger every day.

And I never tired of gazing on this tiny precious life. I'd watch him sleep, watching him breathe, in and out, in and out, checking that tiny precious life was safe.

19 years later I still gaze in awe at this precious life, no longer mine but his own man. I only hope that I have breathed enough life, dreams and hope into him over the years that he thrives...that he is happy... and has a life full of love.

Prayer:

Father God,

You formed us from the dust and you breathed life into our bodies.

Sometimes though we forget that we are a part of you, your creation.

As we inhale, breathe your life Father into our lives today.

As we inhale, breathe your love Father into our hearts.

Fill us Father, so that as we exhale we breathe your life onto everyone we encounter,
so we exhale your love out to the world.

Amen.

Breathing pain and hurt

Acts 9: 1

Last year I reconciled with someone who had once been a dear friend and sister to me. It was such a joy to be able to rekindle the friendship that had seemed to be lost in words of acrimony and devastating hurt. Due to taking sides in a family breakup, hateful things were said. Cruel words had been spat out, cruel words that could not be taken back, cruel words that ensured painful actions were taken. The happiness of friendship and sisterhood were lost to memory. The breathed pain and hurt created animosity between us. But I missed my friend. I missed the laughs and the fun times we had shared. I missed telling her my secrets and my joys. I missed the gatherings and holidays we had shared with our children. Most of all I missed her presence.

Over time I was able to understand that it was hurt and pain that had caused the cruel words and actions.

And so, I prayed. I prayed and asked the Lord to reconcile us. I asked the Lord that my friend might be able to forgive me for taking the side that wasn't hers. And he answered my prayers.

Prayer:

There are people today I need to forgive.

Take this burden of pain and anger from my heart and fill me with your insight and understanding.

Give me courage Lord to make the first move, to apologise for the hurt I have caused.

Give me strength Lord to reach out in love and reconciliation to heal broken relationships and fragmented hearts.

Amen.

Sharp breaths of guilt

Psalm 32

There was a period in my life when I had a lot of debt. I liked to live large and I lived on credit to pay for my extravagant lifestyle. But no one knew this. I kept it a secret from all my loved ones. I kept spending and when I couldn't pay it back the pressure started to mount. I pretended that everything was fine, but the pressure started to affect my health. For you see I have asthma and one of my triggers is stress. As the debt got higher the tighter my chest became, my breathing constricted. I was choking. All I could consume were short, sharp breaths of guilt and shame.

And just when I thought it was going to overwhelm and drown me, I prayed for help and the Lord sent me a lifeline. I was forced to admit my debt to my parents. Mercifully they didn't judge me, they just loved me and helped me to sort out the mess I had gotten myself into. I could breath normally again.

Prayer:

Almighty God,
thank you for sending your son Jesus who through his life and death forgives our sins and reconciles us to you.
Help me Lord out of the debt I am in.
You know the problems I am facing right now.
Throw me a lifeline and show me a way out of this situation so that I can breathe easy and live in freedom.
I ask this in Jesus' name,
Amen.

As the deer...

Psalm 42: 1-2

Thirst can be a powerful metaphor for our longing for God. Water is something that we often take for granted until suddenly we realise we are absolutely desperate - just pure gasping.

The relief we feel when we manage to get that drink is blissful. It restores our mood but also some of our personality. The water brings back to us some parts of our self that we had to hold suspended while our bodies were focusing on survival. In the same way getting to know God helps to restore us to ourselves. In a sense getting to know God involves getting to know yourself too.

Prayer:

You are the wine at the wedding
and the whisky at the wake.
You are the energy gel on the last stretch of the race.
You are the lukewarm sugary tea in a styrofoam cup
that on that cold dark night was just enough.
You are the syrup for the cough,
the coffee that keeps us up
and the camomile that sends us off.
You are in the pop of parties
and the dregs of disaster.
As the deer longs for the water
so my soul longs after you.
Amen.

A new kind of shelter

John 3: 1-17

Stone, glass and wood, expertly combined with cement, putty and nails can build a shelter that keeps the wind and rain out. It can keep you sheltered no matter what hooley blows outside. However, in the journey of life we need somewhere to call home, even for the night, in both a physical but also spiritual sense.

A bothy might allow you to dry your boots and warm your bones, but beyond that we all need a shelter that allows us to dry our eyes and warm our souls. In John 3 there is offer of a new kind of shelter, a shelter not needed following our earthly birth, but following a second birth through the Holy Spirit.

At this point in the week of journeying in the wind and rain of a Scottish spring, looking for shelters in the hills, there is a change from individual practical needs that moves towards being about something more. This is a spiritual rebirth that sets you on a journey that will lead you into a community seeking shelter and sharing shelter together.

From this day forward, the journey has changed and we speak of a new kind of shelter.

Prayer:

God,
help me be prepared to see that things must change.
Help me to look to you in faith when I see that all can and will be restarted in you.
God,
help me keep on the path, knowing that I have to be ready to see what is new, sure that you offer a new kind of shelter.
Amen.

The rains have come

Psalm 27

When was the last time you were soaked to the skin? Caught in the rain to the point that your underpants could be rung out! Even with the most hi-tech walking kit sometimes the wind and rain conspire to get you wet in places you don't want to talk about in church. These storms can last moments, hours or days, and when faced with them a bothy tucked away in the mountains is a shelter more revelled in than any other.

Get inside, get the fire lit and the kettle on. If you are lucky someone has beaten you to it and the smoke buffeted from the chimney will cheer you on your last few steps.

Sometimes you will end up in a bothy for lunch and the storm will continue to the point you stay the night, not wanting to head back out into all the weather can throw at you. So there you stay, in the shelter, knowing that sometimes the best way to continue your journey is to hunker down and weather the storm.

The psalmist is writing in the face of a storm, as is often the case, and these storms speak into the metaphorical bad weather of our own lives. It is easy to think the only way to continue a journey of faith is keep trudging on, but sometimes the best thing is to hunker down with God and wait, weather the storm and be ready to head on in more clement weather.

Prayer:

Help me be prepared to hunker down with you.

Help me to look to you in faith when I'm soaked to the skin and need time to dry out.

God,

help me keep on the path, even if I have to pause for a while, sure that you are our shelter in the storm.

Amen.

Water from the rock

Exodus 17: 1-7

I find it hard to relax, unwind, let my guard down, concentrate or even think straight when I am thirsty. Once I realise I'm thirsty I quickly become irritable and lose a sense of perspective. I go from not realising I'm thirsty to suddenly gasping in a blink.

Our need to drink is a constant reminder of our bodies and their frailty. We may think we are as tough as nails... but we are nails that need regularly watered and to sit in the sunshine and have someone to talk to... we are basically houseplants.

In our reading from Exodus today we see a deep physical need burst into the narrative. It's easy to imagine the frustration, the headaches, the weariness, the tension of their dehydration. It must have been unbearable, each one more grouchy than the last. In the midst of this moanfest God doesn't tell Moses that the Israelites should just put up with it. He says – "Gie them sumhin to drink!" In the middle of a dry and inhospitable place God provided life-giving water to a thirsty people. Sometimes we make things so complicated and nuanced and layered and actually all somebody needs is a glass of water.

Where are the rocks that God is calling us to strike? The dry, inhospitable places that could literally and figuratively slake the thirst of others? Where are there pockets of possibility that offer us opportunities to bless those around us?

Prayer:

Rockbreaker,
lead us to life-giving water and to people we can share it with.

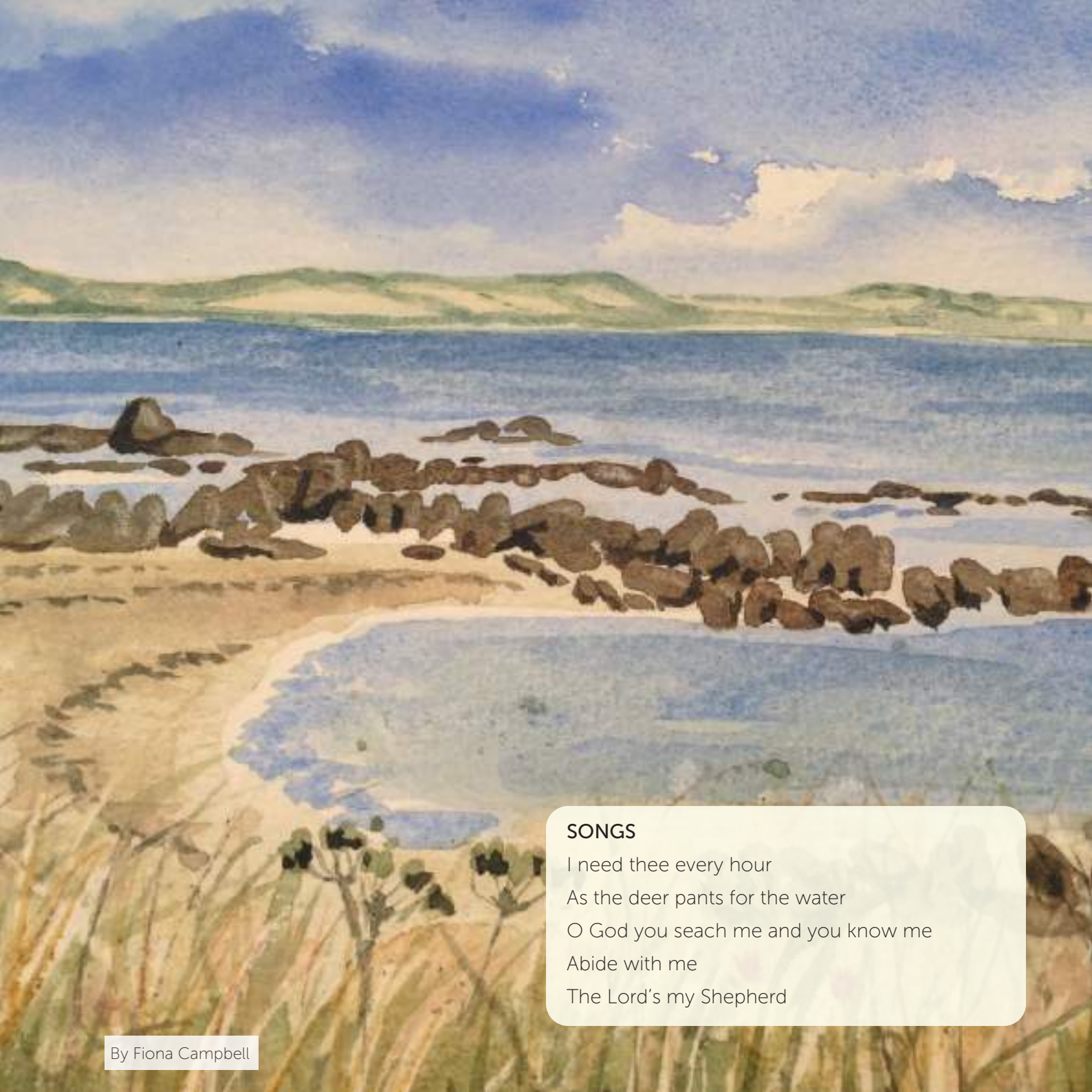
Lead us:

to those who are dehydrated and irritable,
to those who are dehydrated and exhausted,
to those who are dehydrated and unwell,
to those who are dehydrated and dying,
to those who are dehydrated and longing for something more.

Help us not to ignore the physical needs of those around us.

Guide us in tending to body and spirit as one continuous person.

Amen.



SONGS

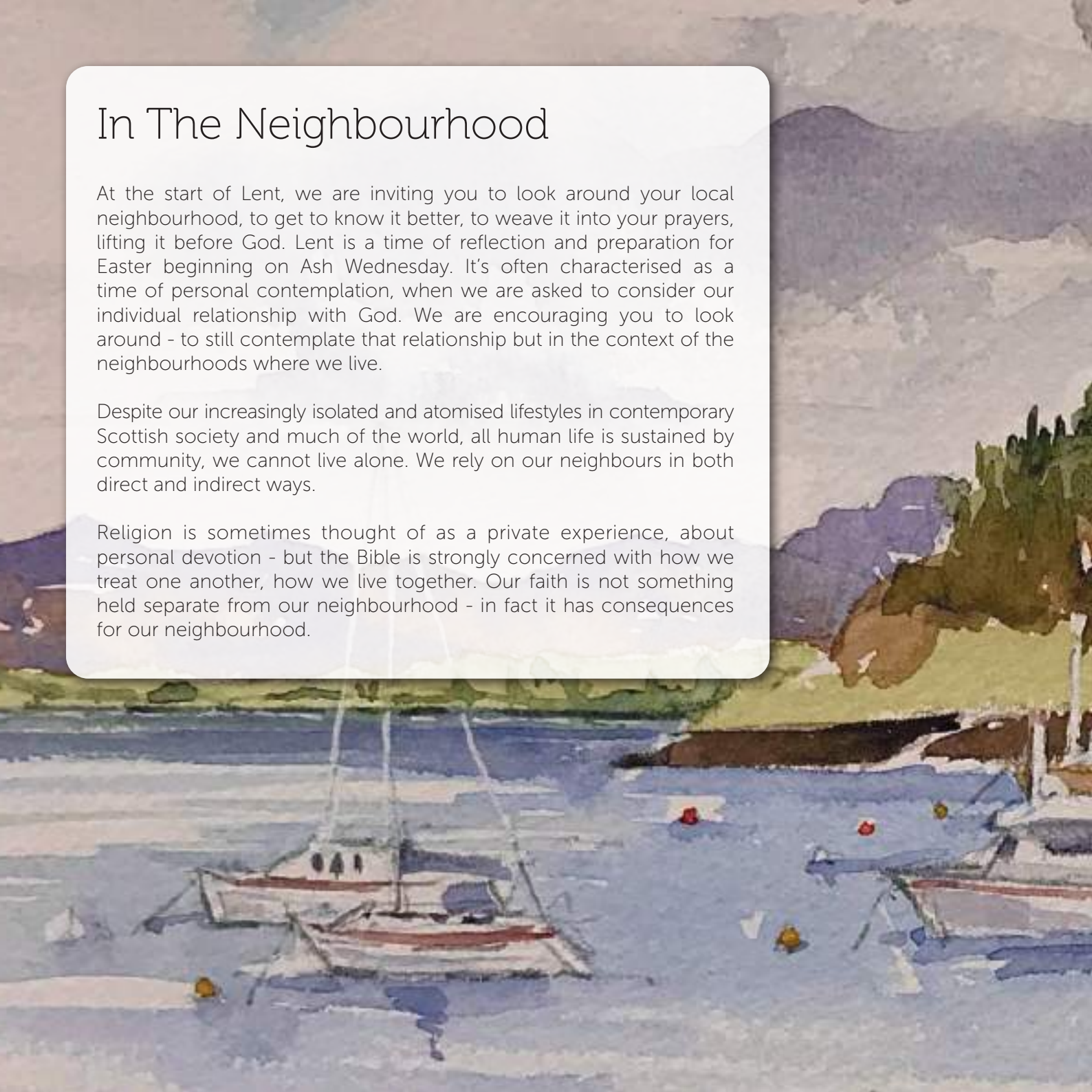
I need thee every hour
As the deer pants for the water
O God you search me and you know me
Abide with me
The Lord's my Shepherd

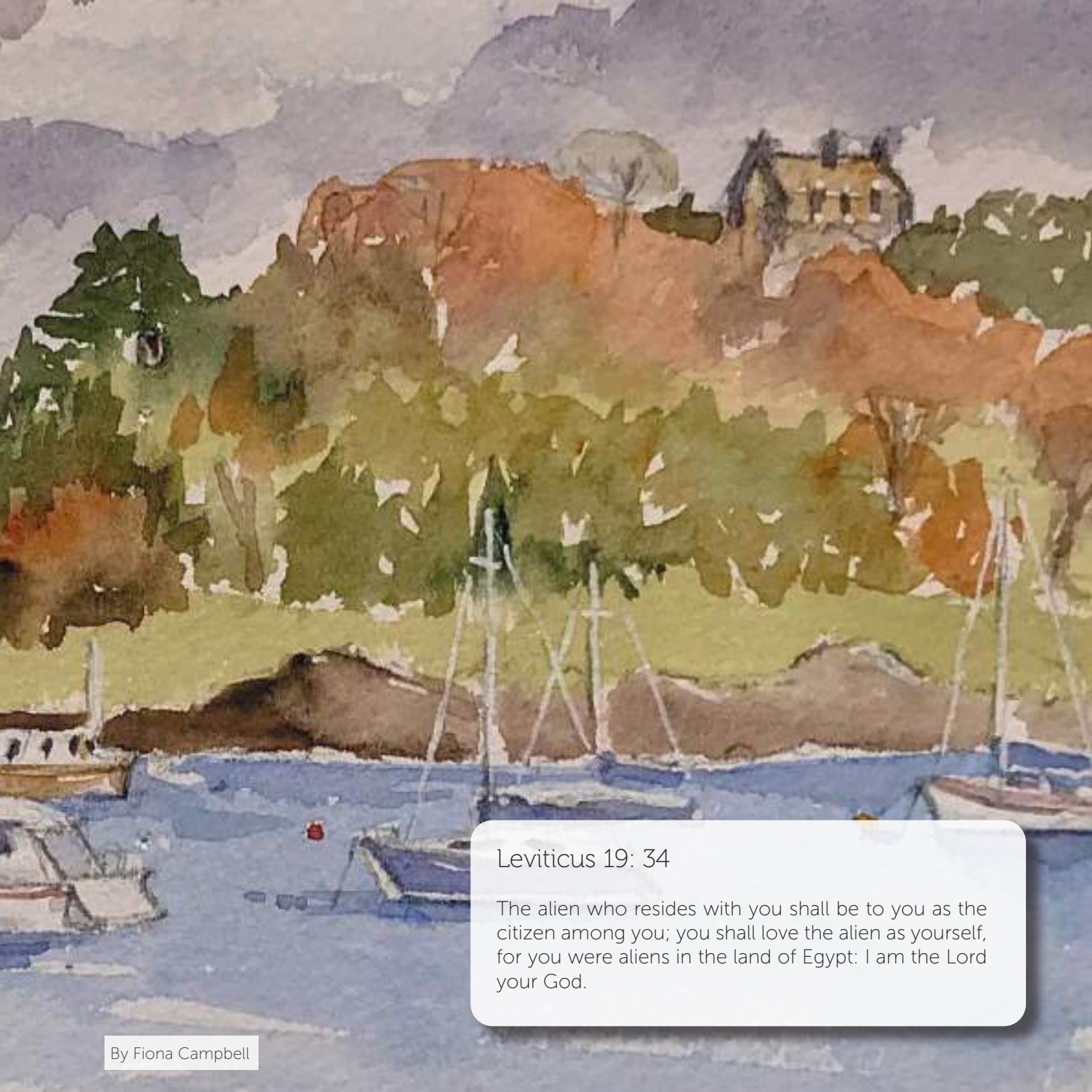
In The Neighbourhood

At the start of Lent, we are inviting you to look around your local neighbourhood, to get to know it better, to weave it into your prayers, lifting it before God. Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for Easter beginning on Ash Wednesday. It's often characterised as a time of personal contemplation, when we are asked to consider our individual relationship with God. We are encouraging you to look around - to still contemplate that relationship but in the context of the neighbourhoods where we live.

Despite our increasingly isolated and atomised lifestyles in contemporary Scottish society and much of the world, all human life is sustained by community, we cannot live alone. We rely on our neighbours in both direct and indirect ways.

Religion is sometimes thought of as a private experience, about personal devotion - but the Bible is strongly concerned with how we treat one another, how we live together. Our faith is not something held separate from our neighbourhood - in fact it has consequences for our neighbourhood.





Leviticus 19: 34

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Gratefully share

Deuteronomy 26: 1–11

Sometimes reading ideas for life which were written 27 centuries ago can be a challenge! What does it mean today, to offer our 'first fruits' to God?

Whatever stage of life you're at, there are things you do, that you could offer the best of to God. Being loved by God prompts us to share our time and gifts with others – that's what builds community. This is 'radical love', which goes beyond being polite or obliging and it isn't always easy to do. So, how to make a start?

Reflect on what fills your days. Do your activities, reflect who God is calling you to be?

Take a moment to think of the things that matter to you, and make a list thanking God for those things. There will probably be ordinary activities of life, your family, special places or interests you love! How could you combine those things with radical love in action; taking the gifts God has given you out into your community?

When you're picking up your shopping could you share some with a food-bank, or give an elderly neighbour a regular lift? Does someone at school or work need a chat this week, and if that someone is you, would sharing your difficulty build a supportive friendship into the future?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, as I look at the things of my life, listed on a page, I thank you for your generosity and care of me.

Knowing that you love me, and that the details of my life matter to you, gives me a sense of worth and purpose. I see that I can find strength in you, to face the challenges that come as part of life.

As I lay my life before you, show me where I can respond with love to others in the way that you love me.

As I walk the streets of my neighbourhood today, and look into the faces I pass, may love fill my heart and move me to a word, or an action.

Amen.

Everyone belongs here

Leviticus 19: 34

Isn't it strange that while we want to be recognised for our achievements, when we do stand out in a crowd we find it difficult and painful? Most people want to fit in; to belong and find a place in the community in which they choose to live. The writers of Leviticus refer to 'a stranger' or in some translations 'an alien' who settles among us - terms which should challenge our ideas of befriending our community. Loving, as Christ loves all people, calls us to accept people who are different to us - and that doesn't just mean a different nationality.

A deciduous tree deep in the conifer forest merges with the other trees till suddenly it stands out as it turns yellow and orange and red in the crisp autumn air. Now it's 'an alien' amongst fifty shades of green, yet it draws its nourishment from the same earth as the other trees, roots entwined and branches brushing together. All grow and fulfil their potential in the light of God.

Prayer:

Father God, who nourishes my life with your love,
walk with me in this day, when I'll meet all kinds of people.

Some I cannot fail to notice and others I must strive to notice. Some I will find easier to love than others. May the love of Jesus grow in me, so that I share a word of kindness, a smile of welcome, or a caring action, to help another to feel included and affirmed.

If someone rejects me, puts me down or leaves me out, catch my thinking before I take offence.

Remind me of Jesus' experiences as he walked among people, respected and insulted in equal measure. If we rejoice in his saving love, we square our shoulders to share his costly service to you.

When I feel myself an outsider in the community, faced with overwhelming challenges, draw me into your presence, to experience your love afresh. Encourage me to find a place in your Christian family where all are welcomed and belong.

Amen.

Deal fairly, do not oppress

Jeremiah 7: 1-7

As Winter transitions into Spring, we look forward to the sight of a Bluebell Wood. Because the leaves are just starting to open on the trees, it's possible for the sunlight to transform the spiky dark foliage on the ground; stems rise, and suddenly there are drifts of mauve and blue flowing around the trunks of the trees as far as the eye can see. The wood demonstrates the mutuality of nature – leafless trees allow other plants to flourish; once in leaf, they protect tender plants so that all have a chance to shine.

I'm sure none of us thinks that we 'oppress' someone else. Yet in every walk of life some of us have authority over others – parents, siblings, work colleagues, the list goes on.

'Mend your ways and your doings' says Jeremiah, 'deal fairly with one another'.

So, when someone else is having a difficult day, and yours is going really well, you have a choice. Will you think, 'Whew, thank goodness that didn't happen to me!' Or will you go and offer to help make things better?

We are called to live among people in a spirit of loving kindness and mutuality. If something will fix a situation – do it! If something you do will disadvantage someone else – don't do it! Build up your community with radical love.

Prayer:

Lord, in the wild wood of life,

I'm so busy trying to grow myself, I don't always notice those around me, or even think how they may be feeling.

As I find my own sense of belonging in you, help me to reflect on how others may experience life in my community, at my work, or in my university/school. Although I need to think about my needs, the needs of others are just as important to you, and to me, so help me not to be self-centred.

As you value me, I value others, and can show them your love in action.

Show me how to be fair-minded, listening to the quiet voices and calming the strident ones.

Amen.

The Lord is my safe retreat

Psalm 91: 1-2

This psalm is a huge source of courage when we feel knocked about by life.

Knowing that God will come to our rescue when we face difficulties, gives us the strength to be true to Jesus, even when the storm still surrounds us.

Storms are a normal part of the natural world around us. Hot air rises, cool air falls, winds build up, storms break, and like disagreements in our family or community, they can shake our lives. But they are normal, and so are the challenges of life. When we try to exercise radical love in our dealings with others, they are not always kind to us. We try to do the right thing, and others manipulate or wrong us and we fail in what we hoped to achieve. In difficulties we are reminded that our own strength is just not enough, and asking God for his strength and guidance is what we are supposed to do. Often it's only in the depths that we truly listen to God's words to us, and learn how to work with him.

Prayer:

Sheltering God,

I thank you that I can come into your presence both to rejoice and praise, and to share my pain.

There are times when the Christian life brings me great joy and peace, but other times it is so hard to keep going.

Help me in the decisions I make today, to draw on the love you give to me, to help me love others.

Help me when things do not turn out as I expected, to call on the Holy Spirit for the right words to say. Remind me that wherever I go, I am never far from your care or cut off from that place of shelter and safe retreat.

Amen.

Jesus is Lord!

Romans 10: 8-13

Paul writes, 'the same Lord is Lord of all', and we see how that teaching has made its way around the world. There are words in every language to express the name of Jesus, and although the words are spelled differently or appear in characters we do not recognise, they all name God's son. In Paul's mind 'Jew' and 'Greek', stand for 'the chosen people', and the 'outsiders' respectively, but these divisive terms are obsolete in the coming of Jesus, who works out his salvation for people of all races and nations.

No one is left out of the love of God, and therefore we too are called to share our faith and our care with all people. We may feel most comfortable with friends, but only through the trust of friendliness, with neighbours, or strangers, will we find the opportunity to share the Gospel of Salvation.

Prayer:

God of the human race,

accept my praise and worship, as I join my voice to those of others around the world, who are also praying to you just now.

As our cries come to you, bless us: your family across the earth, and part of the great company of heaven.

Thank you for those who have gone before us - family, wise friends, teachers and saints who brought us the name of Jesus and his teaching and who in the kingdom of heaven, are very close to us.

Bless the community in which I live, with its mix of people from other nations and backgrounds.

Help me to listen to, and understand their culture, and draw us together as fellow creatures with more to share and hold in common than to divide us.

Amen.

A high place

Luke 4: 1-13

We talked earlier in the week about keeping a sense of perspective and priority. In this event from Jesus' life, we see how he prepared for leadership and learned to deal with its risks.

As Christians, it's important to grow our faithful relationship with God into an active discipleship. In his strength and teaching we find the resources to move from being a spectator to a participant in the life of the Church, where we are encouraged to take on leadership tasks, teaching or serving others as we ourselves have been taught.

However Jesus' experience teaches us to be self-aware. How quickly we can come to believe in our own ability and judgement. How easily that slides into pride and arrogance, and that is not service to God, but disaster for our soul.

Resisting the scope of his unlimited power, Jesus humbly reminds himself of the words of the Bible – a lesson for all us when we might go wrong. Repeatedly he fights off inclinations to an easy way to attract people to him and we read later in the Gospels how he goes on to embody the humble servant-leader.

Prayer:

Gracious God, I am encouraged to read of Jesus' struggle with his work in this world. I too am sometimes tempted to the easy way out, or to courting people's praise and approval. Show me how to serve humbly, and seek joy in the tasks which do not bring great praise. When I am tempted, come close to me and remind me of your promises, so that I may find the reserves to be the best version of the person you have called me to be.

If I have been content to be a faithful spectator, and not yet attempted to be a disciple, grant me the inspiration to see where I might offer service to my community or church. May the Holy Spirit strengthen me to take on new tasks and grow into leadership.

Amen.

It's not a half-hearted love

Luke 10: 25-36

At the end of a busy day, the best thing you can do to get things in perspective, is to walk outside and look up. There, in a dark star-filled sky, you see the magnificence of God's creation. If you're even luckier and you look north, away from city lights you might catch sight of the Northern Lights rippling and gleaming. This is no half-hearted Creator but a God who treats us to extravagant beauty and glory. Once we've reflected on that, the perspective of what happened inside the house, or at work today, drops back into its proper place in life.

It's the same with emergencies – a man lies bleeding in the road, so you run to help. No second thoughts about where you were going – it's an emergency, so it's a priority and our help is not given half-heartedly.

Jesus says that the community in which we share, is a priority for our time and effort as Christians. We don't hold back when we can care for others – radical love can mean giving our lives away instead of concentrating on self. But it's only in doing this that we suddenly discover a fulfilling life lived close to God which is better than we dreamt.

Prayer:

Extravagant God, thank you for the beauty which surrounds us in nature.

Not one or two stars but a sky full of galaxies. Not just a spectacular rainstorm, but a sky lit up with a rainbow.

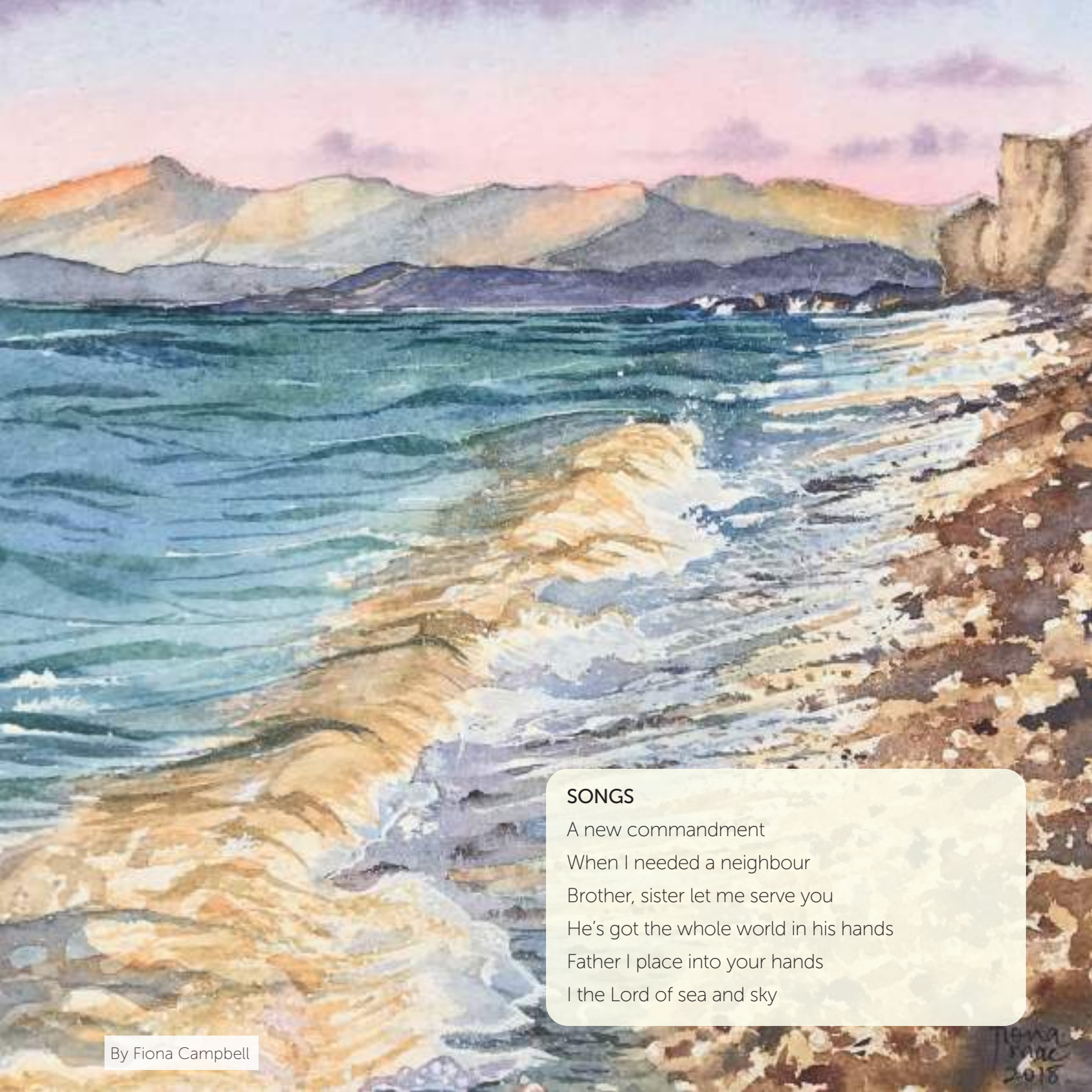
Nudge me out of half-heartedness – the Scottish reserve that is a mark of our nation. I love home and family and thank you for it, but send me out into our community with love for others.

Send me to care for young children, for vulnerable older folks, for neighbours whose lives are restricted by lack of health or the loss of work and income.

Teach me to be ready, not just for an emergency, but for day-to-day care and concern.

Bless me with the understanding that your love keeps on giving, and that in giving, I too, receive.

Amen.



SONGS

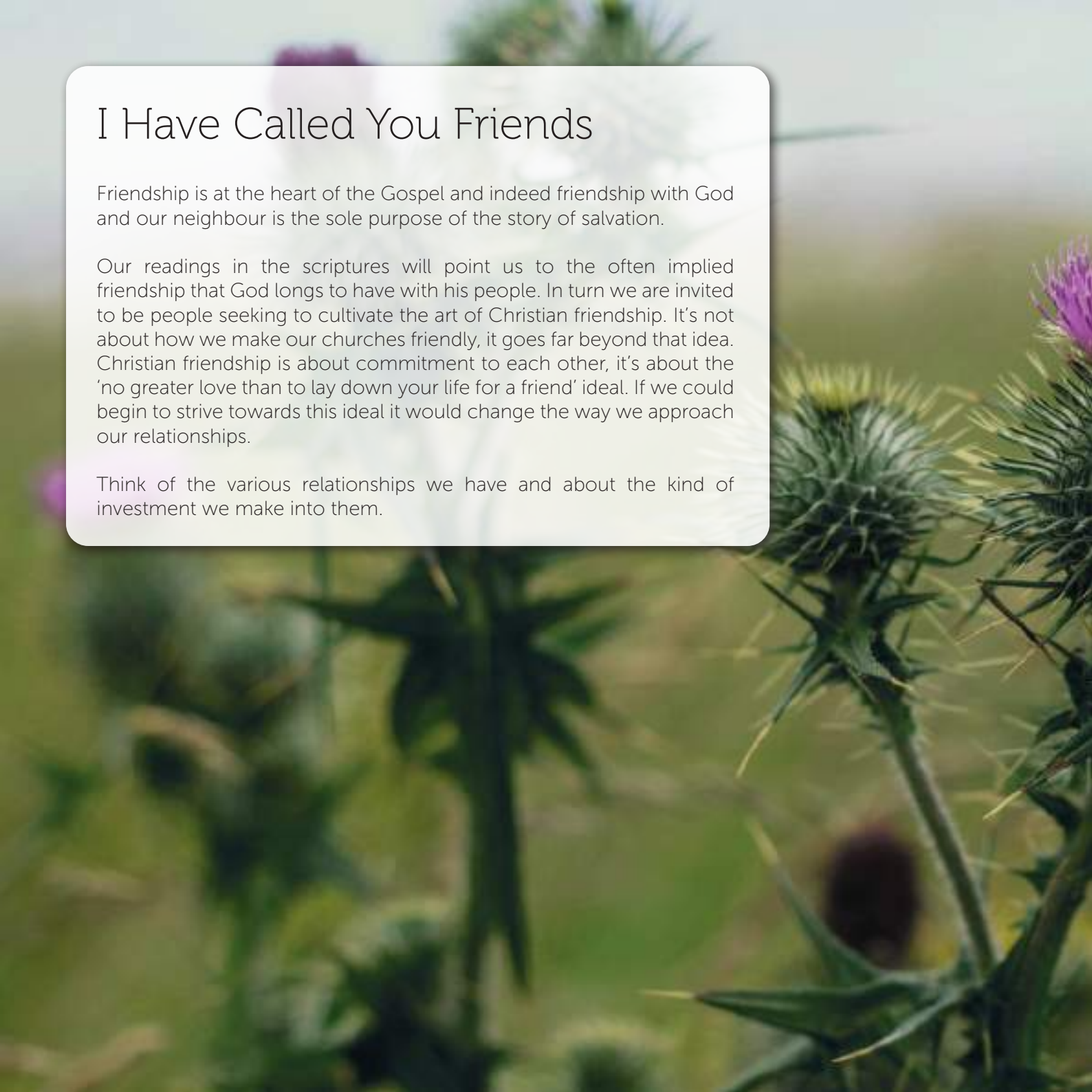
A new commandment
When I needed a neighbour
Brother, sister let me serve you
He's got the whole world in his hands
Father I place into your hands
I the Lord of sea and sky

I Have Called You Friends

Friendship is at the heart of the Gospel and indeed friendship with God and our neighbour is the sole purpose of the story of salvation.

Our readings in the scriptures will point us to the often implied friendship that God longs to have with his people. In turn we are invited to be people seeking to cultivate the art of Christian friendship. It's not about how we make our churches friendly, it goes far beyond that idea. Christian friendship is about commitment to each other, it's about the 'no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend' ideal. If we could begin to strive towards this ideal it would change the way we approach our relationships.

Think of the various relationships we have and about the kind of investment we make into them.





John 15: 15

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Honesty, hiding place and hope

Psalm 71: 1-6

Honesty, verse 1: The friendship we enjoy with God means that we can be honest without fear of shame. Honest about our fear and our egotistical living, honest about our doubts, our desires and our dreaming. This honesty is essential for integrity in friendship, and because of the Love required to maintain honesty, God invites and welcomes us to take refuge in Him.

Hiding Place, verses 2, 3 and 4: Our refuge in God depends upon God's righteousness, not ours, and so we are able to stand firm in Him, our "strong fortress... our rock". God's friendship is never about making us feel small and always about welcoming us home.

Hope, verse 5: When folks walk away from us, and offer excuses for their unwillingness to pursue us, call to mind that God will never abandon the ones He has birthed from the wombs of His beloved daughters. Hallelujah!

Prayer:

Holy God, give us courage to trust that Your love is great enough to receive our honesty. Give us courage to lean on You when we are tired going it alone and remind us that You, Who have given us life, are also the Author of all hope.
Amen.

It endures all things

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Verse 7: "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

My granny used to say, "Love is blind, marriage opens the eyes!"

And she was right, love is blind. Whether we are married or remain 'unclaimed treasures,' love is the hard work of walking with friends and family irrespective of the journey, the hard work of refraining from cynicism, the hard work of believing that God, in His friendship with us, is blinded by reckless love and invites us to do the same in our love of others.

Prayer:

"O Love that fires the sun, keep me burning..." * grant that by Your Spirit, I might love as you love, blindly, recklessly, completely.

Amen

* From Bruce Cockburn's 'Lord of the Starfields'

In your right mind?

Matthew 5: 1-11

Who in their right mind would see “poverty in spirit” as a state of blessedness? Who in their right mind would aspire to live any of the beatitudes?

That’s the point though, we don’t follow Jesus in our right mind, we follow Jesus with the mind of His promised Holy Spirit.

Jesus turns the societal and spiritual norms of His day upside down and invites us to do the same. The friendship He offers us is far from cosy, far from neat and tidy. The friendship Jesus offers us is costly, requiring us to challenge the norms of our day.

As a friend of Jesus, we are called to change our thinking, our preconceived ideas, called to see things differently, upside-down if you like, through the eyes of Jesus, our Friend. For who would have seen the Cross as victory unless seen through His eyes? With the Beatitudes Jesus is telling us point blank that as His friends our understanding of God’s character, our understanding of the complexities of life, our response to God’s great love must change.

Prayer:

Holy God, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds that are opened by Your Holy Spirit and the courage to be a friend to others as You are a friend to us.
Amen.

Friends with World Church

2 Corinthians 8: 1-2

Friendship is one of the rich things of earth. A well of liberality. A medicine which has made the strange familiar and the troubled calm. An engine which has driven missionaries and aid workers to strange and troubled places. Such mission migrants often report their attempts at friendship multiplied in return by those who give joyfully out of their extreme poverty.

Friendship is one of the rich things of heaven, given Sunday names like grace and mercy and peace, shared by Father and Son and Spirit, celebrated whenever we gather in worship.

Give and receive friendship in worship. Seek it in daily life. Be delighted when you find it in unexpected places and surprising people.

Prayer:

Lord, open us up to the friendship of all your people.

May our eyes see what should be brought into the light, may our ears hear what should be heard, may our hearts ponder what is good for us and for others, for your name's sake,

Amen.

Friendships with Politicians

Romans 13:1

The Bible balances political life between the good authority of God and Roman rule in Romans 13, and the persecution of the beast and its Roman master in Revelation 13. In our congregation, at our last communion, we shared in friendship by being served bread by our local MSP, and wine by our local Provost. We do well to pray for Christians in communities where they receive hostility, not friendship, from their political leaders.

Praying for leaders is an act of friendship, whatever their mould. If politicians estimate that one letter represents the views of 300 constituents, one act of friendship is likely to count very high – and politicians need real friends.

Prayer:

Guide those who have authority over others, O God.

Remove the wicked from office, and open the way for righteous men and women to rule, in this and every land, we pray.

Amen.

Friendship with Commerce and Industry

Colossians 3:23

Whatever your task . . . mailshot or job lot, high road or offload, instagram or making jam, H.R. team or diamond seam, new broom or boardroom, air waves or piper's cave, jail reform or Benidorm, preacher's study, farmer's muddy, kitchen roll, opinion poll, wearing purple, breeding turtles . . . whatever your task, do it for God.

The pattern of work has radically changed. Many people are engaged in soulless selling, or pressured caring. Many people have a portfolio of occupations. In America and Europe, the ratio of richest remuneration to poorest is much much higher than it was fifty years ago. Fewer people have time for friendship. More people have need of it.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, wise friend, honest friend, loving friend, may we invest well in the lives of those who drive the economic wheels of our society.

We pray for those whose decisions shape the life and wellbeing of others.

May their lives in turn be shaped by obedience to you and to your ways, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Friendships as Carers

Galatians 6: 9-10

The challenges of caring range from those struggling to get from one client to another in a hurry and in a town they don't know well, to those looking after incontinent family members who are losing the place. The caring professions are now under such pressure that many feel they have no time to do the job for which they were trained.

It has been said that without Christians the voluntary services of our country would fall apart. Give thanks for those who care, and keep on caring.

Prayer:

Lord God, we are grateful for those who have cared for us, and for all whose care and friendship is a light to our nation.

Help them not to grow weary in well doing.

May their witness back up the sharing of the gospel in our generation, we ask, through Jesus Christ who cares for the least and the lost.

Amen.



SONGS

What a friend we have in Jesus
A new commandment
I am the church, you are the church
I need thee every hour
Just a closer walk with thee
Brother, sister, let me serve you
Come Christians join to sing

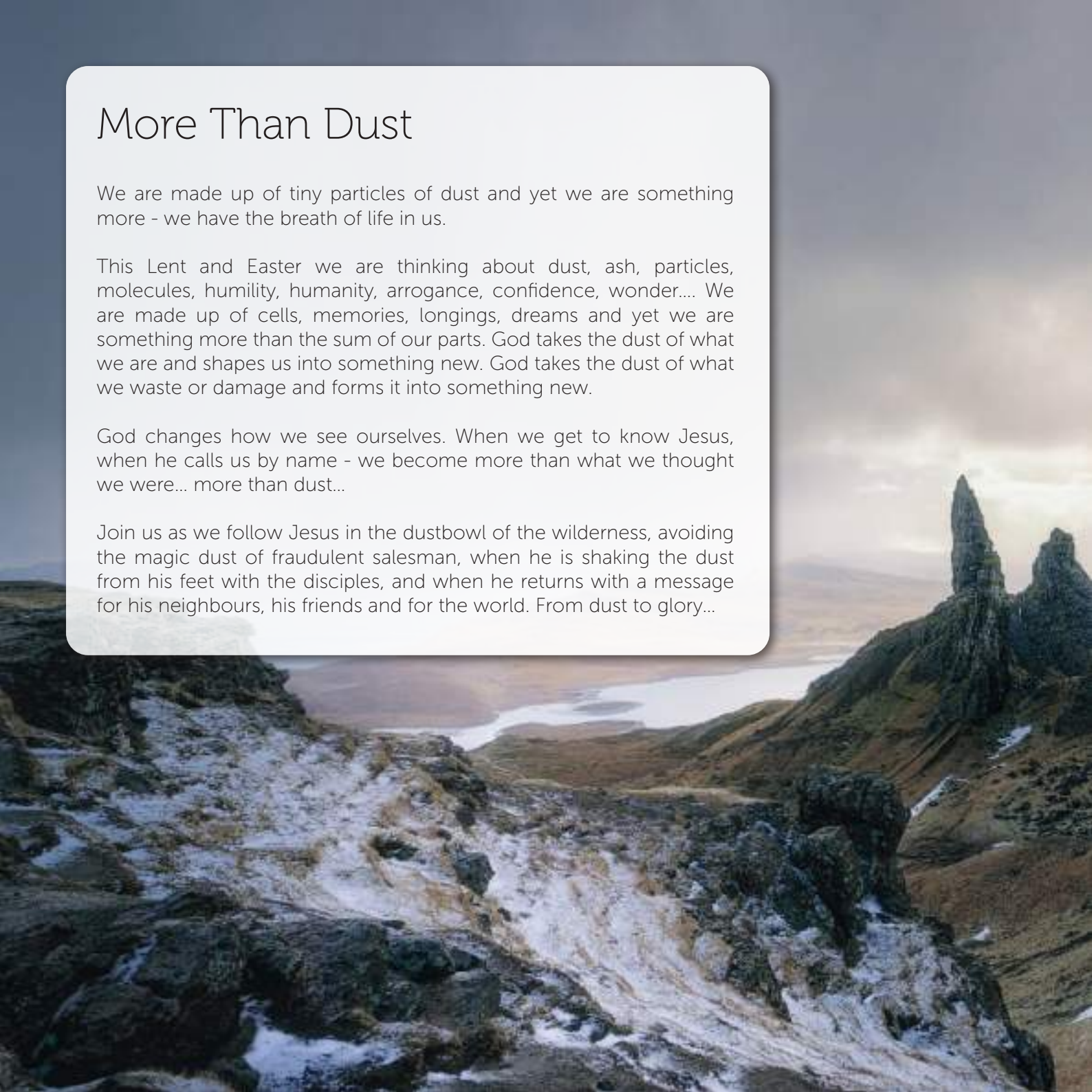
More Than Dust


We are made up of tiny particles of dust and yet we are something more - we have the breath of life in us.

This Lent and Easter we are thinking about dust, ash, particles, molecules, humility, humanity, arrogance, confidence, wonder.... We are made up of cells, memories, longings, dreams and yet we are something more than the sum of our parts. God takes the dust of what we are and shapes us into something new. God takes the dust of what we waste or damage and forms it into something new.

God changes how we see ourselves. When we get to know Jesus, when he calls us by name - we become more than what we thought we were... more than dust...

Join us as we follow Jesus in the dustbowl of the wilderness, avoiding the magic dust of fraudulent salesman, when he is shaking the dust from his feet with the disciples, and when he returns with a message for his neighbours, his friends and for the world. From dust to glory...



A dramatic landscape of a mountain range with a prominent flat-topped peak under a cloudy sky. The mountains are dark and rugged, with patches of snow or ice. The sky is overcast with soft light breaking through the clouds.

Luke 4:1-4

Now Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wild. For forty wilderness days and nights he was tested by the Devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when the time was up he was hungry.

The Devil, playing on his hunger, gave the first test: "Since you're God's Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to really live."

Getting his hands dirty

Isaiah 53: 1-6

Have you ever wondered what Jesus looked like?

Usually they paint him looking handsome, often gentle and welcoming, so why is it important that in 53:1-4 the prophet Isaiah is describing God's Servant (and for many of us this prophecy is about Jesus) as "a scrawny seedling, a scrubby plant in a parched field... with nothing attractive about him, nothing to cause us to take a second look". *

And not only is he telling us God's Servant is lacking in the good looks department, maybe even ugly to look at, he is also telling us that "he was looked down on and passed over, a man who suffered and knew pain at firsthand. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum". *

Ugly, marginalised, treated with contempt –why?

Isaiah made it clear that Jesus came because God loves the world – he came not just to those looking for God's help and longing to live a good life; he also came to speak to folk stuck in the depths of human experiences, and to offer everyone hope. Whoever we are, whatever we are like, whatever mess we may be in, he came to stand with us and say – "You! Are Loved! Follow Me and I will give you Life in all its fullness!"

He was ready to get his hands dirty, reaching out to draw us to God. None of what goes wrong for us is his fault. As Isaiah says "We've all done our own thing, gone our own way. And God has piled all our sins on him." * Nonetheless he is here beside us, willing us to take his hands, accept rescue and a fresh start.

* quoted from The Message. (The Bible in Contemporary Language)

Prayer:

Oh God,
For your company,
whatever roads we wander along, making it possible for us to return home to you;
For your hands,
wounded and torn yet always held out towards us, wanting us to take hold of them and be guided home;
For your love,
waiting and longing for us to see that you offer us forgiveness, and would die rather than stop loving us.
For all of this, we thank you.
Amen

Breaking Stones, Breaking Bread

Luke Chapter 4: 1-11

A number of years ago I was in the Atacama Desert; it was a blindingly hot sunny day. We were distributing water to a small community of people who had been decanted from their homes because of flooding to this dried up corner of Peru. They had no residual water. They depended on a bashed up broken down lorry to bring water to them on a weekly basis. As I walked around the area I stopped at a stone quarry. I could hear the sound of a hammer breaking stones. Sitting on the ground was a man with three young children. He had a dirty rag covering his head to give him shade from the intense sun. All four were breaking stones. This was how this man earned his living. Breaking stones for the roads to earn a crust of bread for his children.

In our world we find parents breaking bread with children, to the sound of fingers tapping ipads and iphones, screened from the reality of breaking stones but not from broken promises.

In today's scripture reading Jesus finds himself in the dustbowl of the desert being tempted to turn stones to bread, He resists the temptation replying, human beings need more than bread to survive.

Prayer:

Lord,
today we remember all who break stones
to earn bread for their children
from the dust of the earth.
Forgive us for our complacency.
Change us so that we rage at injustice,
our faces burning with shame
Renew our hearts and minds.
Move us from deep within to do the right thing
for we have turned the bread of your broken body
into stones that cut and injure the poor.
Speak your words
Reshape your promises in our mouths
that we might live out each letter of love
declaring we are more than dust.
Amen.

God's dustman rescues us

Philippians 2:1-12

Once upon a time..... there were two children, a rich prince and a poor pauper. Thus begins a children's story about the differences between privileged wealth with all its comforts, and stark poverty where brutality, hunger and cold are there every day. The story ends sentimentally, with the prince becoming king - that was after he changed places with the pauper boy and had a long time of experiencing the brutality, hunger and cold. And at the same time the pauper boy grew to love his new existence as prince! - and, back in his palace as king, the prince invited the pauper boy and his mother (NOT the brutal father) to live in the palace with him. It reminds me a bit about this passage from Philippians. Paul talks not of Jesus swapping lives with us, but of him voluntarily giving up his divine existence to live in our human one. Paul writes of this to the young church in Philippi because he was so concerned by their behaviour. Ambition for what they wanted regardless of others' wishes, and the desire for personal prestige were tearing their church apart. To change their self-centredness, and direct them to look once more to God, Paul reminds them what Jesus did for them:

Jesus was essentially and unchangeably God;
He gave up everything to become human for a time -
He who was rich, for our sakes became poor.
He became the lowliest of the low - a slave.
He died the cruellest, lowliest death possible - crucifixion.
Why?
So that he could rescue us and bring us back to God.

In these few verses,
Paul gives us enough to think about for the whole of Lent!
Jesus experienced brutality, hunger, and cold - and betrayal by those closest to him.
He chose to do this, all out of love for humanity,
And the longing to bring us back to God.
He does not want us to be beaten into submission,
But to respond to his love.
"Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all".

Prayer:

Today let us think of that love when we can...
Let us allow our amazement to grow,
And let us offer our gratitude to God.
Amen!!

God's dustman brings a free gift

Romans 5:12-19

I loved the free gifts in the cereal pack, though with brothers we all had to wait our turn! Then there were the free gifts in the teenage magazines, lipsticks and eye pencils and non permanent tattoos. Then there were the free gifts when we bought a car, a house, a dishwasher, a holiday. But by then we knew there are no free gifts!

You never get something for nothing. So when they said that God was offering us a free gift- His grace, His forgiveness and His love, we wondered where the catch would be? And we found that we had to sign up to a lifetime's commitment. We had to agree with the elders of the Church on all spiritual matters. We had to go regularly to Church, and give regularly. Or so we (or they) thought.

Then we read Romans 5: 12-19. And we understood. There are no strings attached to God's love, his grace and his forgiveness. He offers us life with him, abundant love-filled life. Free gratis and for – not for nothing; but Jesus paid for it all.

So – it is difficult to get our heads around and it definitely goes against the grain!

But now we know. "The outcome of sin is death, but the free gift of God is new life, abundant life in Christ Jesus our Lord". (Romans 6:23)

Prayer:

Help us, O God,
To share your free gift with those who do not yet know you.
We pray for all those who struggle with life
because of their mistakes and weaknesses;
We pray for those who struggle
because of the hand they have been dealt –
Illness, poverty, abuse, violence, hunger and thirst.
Guide them, we pray, to your abundant life,
And keep us and your people faithful in sharing
All the gifts of your love.
Amen.

God's dustman clears out the rubbish

Psalm 32

The person who wrote this psalm knew a lot about forgiveness! He knew about the effort there is in avoiding it, in fighting against God's offer of a clean slate. He knew the effort there is in hiding from ourselves the extent of our shortcomings and even our deliberate sins. He knew that unacknowledged regrets and shame can take away our peace of mind and health of body. He described his decision to hand all his rubbish, all the weakness and wrongdoing, over to God, and the sheer relief it gave him.

As he said at the beginning of the psalm –

"Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be. You get a fresh start, your slate's wiped clean. God holds nothing against you and you're holding nothing back from him."

It is everyone's dream. A relationship with nothing to hide, simply a relationship to be lived in love and joy!

No wonder he recommends everyone prays to God while He may be found!

Prayer:

For the deep reservoir of your love,
which time and again engulfs us with your forgiveness
we shout - thank you, thank you, O God!
When we hesitate to ask for forgiveness,
when we forget the past experiences of your love,
when we cling proudly to our mistakes,
give us the insight to let go
and once more to trust you with our brokenness.
Healer who was wounded for us,
renew us, and restore us in your service.
Amen.

When the dust settles

John 4: 27-38

When the dust settles, you have to eat don't you? The fact is, none of us can keep going without provisions. The disciples were practical guys. They wanted to make sure that Jesus was eating. But his answer confused them. What was this mysterious food he was on about? Jesus must have longed for the woman he'd been speaking to a moment earlier. She got it. Not only did she get it, she was already out there telling others, racing to the village and back with the news.

The disciples weren't racers. But you know what? - they were there. They were there at the well and they were there at the cross. They were there when Jesus did things they didn't understand - like speak to foreign women, or voluntarily give himself up to death. They walked with him through it all. They left behind all that they had been in order to become all that they could be; in order to be with the leader they loved.

Funny, in this chapter, how it is the woman who speaks boldly and the men who cluck and care. Maybe our gender isn't as important as our generosity. Maybe when God made us, male and female, from the dust, he breathed into us all the blaze of courage and the warmth of care. Hamlet was right. We are a 'quintessence of dust'. But dust, in God's hands, can do extraordinary things.

Prayer:

Eternal God, from dust we came and to dust we return. But there is more to life than that. There are moments of sweetness and clarity, of bright, shining boldness, when we know, we simply know, that we are more than dust, that each tiny speck of existence has its place in the mind of God.

There are times of simple sharing, of quiet, caring action, when we feel, we deeply feel, that we are more than dust, that we share also in the communion of Christ, in the family of God, in the promise of eternity.

From dust we came, to dust we return. But there is more to death than that. To this quintessence of dust, you add living water, and then we are not dust, we are earth, we are soil, we are life. We are the body of Christ, the image of God, in whom we live and are reborn.

Amen.

Just Imagine

Luke 4: 5-8

What would you do if you had all the power in the world?

John Lennon used his creative power to 'Imagine' a world in which there was no heaven or hell, just 'living for today'. His vision was based on the assumption that worshipping God divides us. Actually, we are pretty good at dividing ourselves.

Without guidance, it's as if the dust we are made of keeps building up and choking us. We know something's wrong, but we have no one to tell us how we are supposed to be shaped. We are adrift, rolling slowly through an empty landscape. Until a clever dustbowl salesman comes along, offering us his snake oil remedy which will bring power and glory, or peace and prosperity. All we have to do is sign here...

"And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'"

Jesus knew there were no short-cuts. Those promising an easy way out, are selling nothing but dust. The only way to change humanity is from the inside. Jesus showed us what that looks like. He lived our life and died our death in order to make new life possible. We worship and serve God because he alone infuses our dusty souls with living water, slowly re-ordering our characters to reflect the richness of the earth out of which God shaped us.

Imagine that.

Prayer:

God, sometimes I imagine a different world. A world in which there is no pain, no child refugees, no natural disasters, no war, or hunger or suffering.

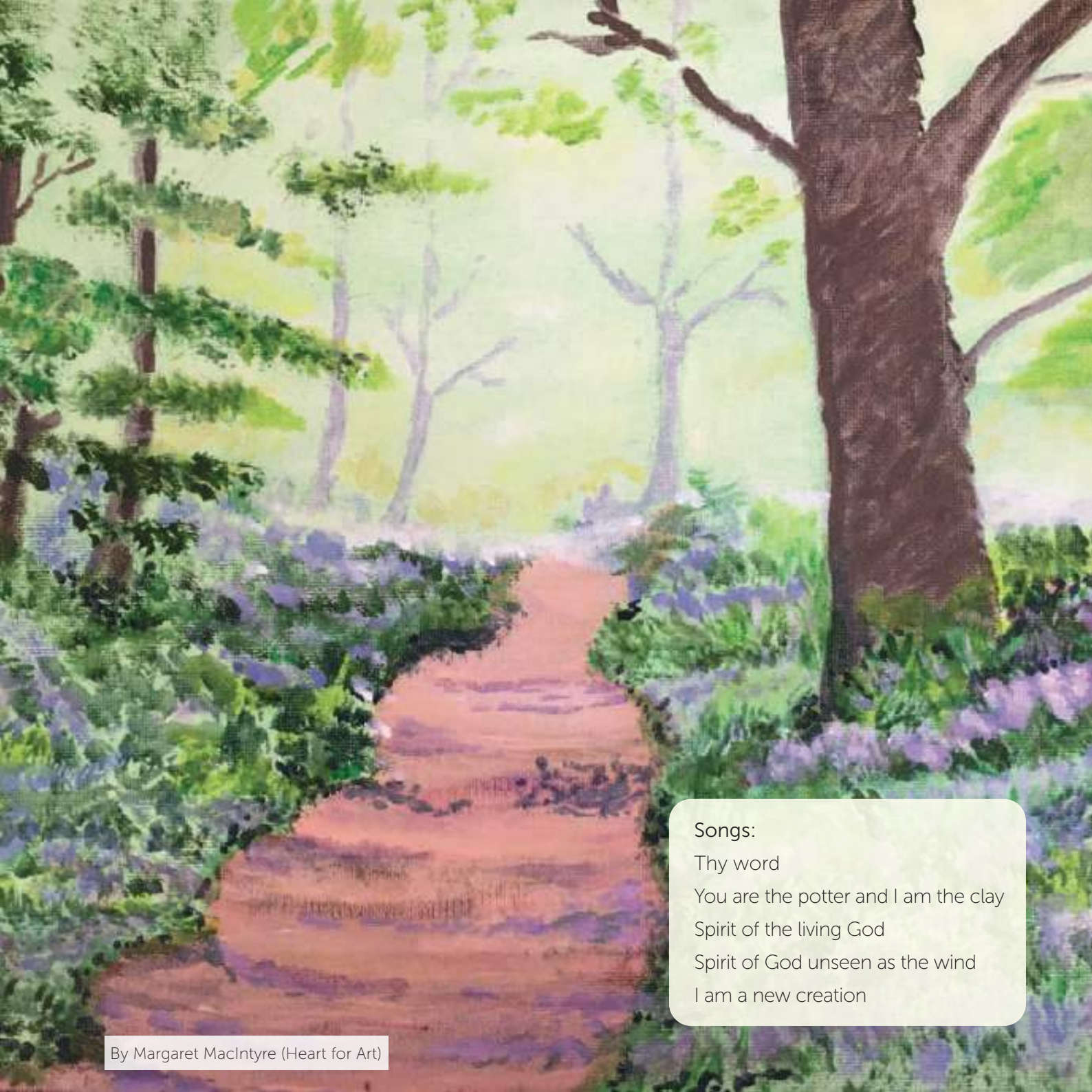
I imagine, and I wonder: Why can't we have a world like that? If I can imagine it why can't you?

They tell me there's a fancy word for my wondering. Theodicy. I don't care so much for fancy words. I just want someone to tell me how to make it stop. The pain, that is. How do I stop it?

I guess what I'd really like, Lord, is the power to change things. Can you do that? Can you change...me?

I imagine that you can.

Amen.



Songs:

Thy word

You are the potter and I am the clay

Spirit of the living God

Spirit of God unseen as the wind

I am a new creation

Dust Need Not Be Grey

We have been inspired by CrossReach's Grey Cake initiative. Using a grey cake - with hidden rainbow layers inside - as an object lesson, we can discover hidden glory beneath our everyday cares and anxieties. We may at times feel our vulnerability, and rightly so, for dust we are and to dust we will return, yet God has placed hidden treasure in the jars of clay.





Isaiah 58: 9-14

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many
generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Of an everlasting love

Genesis 9: 8-17

I remember the furore created when Eyjafjallajökull erupted in 2010. The ash plume extended way up into the upper atmosphere and covered over the airspace of Europe. Flights cancelled and life disrupted.

On the West Coast of Scotland that week - some beautiful, blurry sunsets.

In the face of God, who is bigger than the universe and smaller than a bosun, it was a timely reminder. Our very existence, formed in temporal matter, shining bright, is a glint in the diamond of eternity. In this simple glimpse, is every rainbow and every sunset - a reminder and a covenant of love, from the very heart of the creator.

Prayer:

Lord I am stilled to silence in the arc of the rainbow.
The seamless change of colour through a prism of atmosphere. Light slowed down
Revealing itself
Becoming its component parts
Look closer
Every shade in every spectrum
Every wavelength these poor eyes can behold
Inspiring me to look beyond and within
Realising the infrared, the ultraviolet and all that lies between
All of this in a simple rainbow
A covenant in the moment
Of an everlasting love.
Amen.

The best I can do

Psalm 15: 1-9

I sometimes think men and women, or at least my wife and I, see things in a completely different way. In the hours before guests arrive I can see the house as neat and tidy, where as Jo-anne can see dust on tables, dog hairs on sofas, and all manner of chaos.

I think I give things a "pass" far too much and I think my focus is often on "this will do". I'm not sure God is happy with that.

Life is a gift, not to be squandered on what is just "good enough" but more to be celebrated with "this is the best I can do".

Prayer:

Lord this is the best I can do

It really is...

I've looked at my soul and there are rooms in which I'm scared to tread...

But it's fine right?

Look, I know there are places I should visit in my heart, but the cost...

It's fine right?

There's untapped talents, roads I could travel. I can see them sometimes, but I'm so tired...

But that's fine right?

Father God, I think I need a clear out of my soul, of my heart and a revealing of roads I can only imagine.

Sweep a broom through the rooms I'm sacred to open, make them ready to explore

Cut a swathe to the places my heart should go but cannot yet conceive.

Be a light on the roads still to travel and give me strength

and I know I'm not fine... alright.

Let me do the best I can do.

Amen.

Choose life

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Goodness me the phrase "Choose life" in this reading, it takes me back 20 years to the first iteration of the movie 'Trainspotting'. A gritty morality tale based in the drug dens of a 90s Edinburgh.

I lived it, a medical student and sometime paramedic during the Festival in the 1990s, sharing a joke with the Leith Walk prostitutes while Sector Ranging and resuscitating overdoses in the small hours when they were dumped outside ERI or simply in the streets.

In all of this, life in the raw, there were scenes of quiet and wonderful humanity. The woman whose last act before her fatal MI was to put her grandchildren's Christmas presents under the tree, the man who gave mouth to mouth to a stranger in a doorway, and the mother who ran carrying her teenage son to the next door neighbour when he fell unconscious.

Selflessness in an era of self. Compassion without thought of reward. God amongst us.

Prayer:

Lord, you are in everything
You are in the kindness of strangers
In the quiet word from a friend that made all the difference
In the unconscious held hand when we faced an abyss
In the smile that came at just the right time
In the inappropriate joke that just lifted the mood when all felt lost
In the post on social media that bizarrely made us feel we weren't alone
In the surprising landscape that caught us up short
In the song we thought we had forgotten that gave us hope
All these gifts
All these ordinary angels
Witness the promise of God.
Amen.

A prayer for the chosen

1 Peter 3: 18-22

I think I take my own baptism for granted. Many Christians do in the western world. Often it came as ritual before we were even aware it was happening. But God was aware. This timeless blessing was bestowed on us and bought by the blood of another. There is what is seen and there is what is unseen. Your baptism, my baptism, was a watermark in time. The gathering of souls and angels who were present pushed us forwards into this great adventure.

We can sometimes forget in the humdrum of the day by day the existential miracle that set us on our way.

Prayer:

Jesus
There has always been you
And me
And the universe around us
We swim in time
But you, are timeless
You see all I have been
You see all I am
You see all I will be
And still you love me
Me
And there are no words to say
To one who is at God's right hand, with angels and powers in submission to him
But thank you
Thank you.
Amen.

What's the good?

Luke 9: 18-25

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (verse 25).

What good indeed. I find myself reflecting on this passage often. One of the downsides about my job is the ever present risk of "getting it wrong" or "making a mistake". Now these days that can mean jail time and instant dismissal never to practise again. These days it's a risky time to be a doctor.

I'm not alone in this I suspect - pilots, train drivers, all those who manage uncertainty in an unpredictable world and who live under the shadow of "judgement in retrospect" (a much easier thing to do) are at the mercy of a society that must "blame" and "hold to account".

So what can you do?

You can only be what you can be, the best you can be, with as good a heart as you can muster and trust God to do the rest. I think if I focus on the mission, to serve Christ as best I can with all I have then I'm doing the right thing and what follows is in the plan, what follows is a gift even when it may not seem like it at the time.

This is a prayer for those who face judgment on every decision they make.

Prayer:

Jesus.

There is only you.

The universe flows through the cross.

There was before and there is after and there is that fixed point in the universe.

Help me to keep my focus on that, that cross, that tragedy and that triumph

You faced death and found it wanting

How can I be any less

With you beside me I can live life truly and freely

With you to guide me I can walk with confidence

There is no good to be found in the music of the whole world unless I sing in harmony with you.

Selah

The only thing

Matthew 9: 10-13

When I was in a band in Manchester in the 1990s my songwriting partner was a bloke called Tom Jones - not the Tom Jones (although he had his share of female admirers) - but a different Tom Jones and no less a singer for that.

In those days (before a meaningful internet) we would talk, he and I and our friends, deep into the night about all sorts of topics. Even in those days, in the craziness of the Manchester music scene, often the conversation would turn to matters of existence and existentialism. Tom, an avowed atheist, would spend much of this time talking about how ridiculous the notion of God was and I in my turn would offer counter arguments and a different view.

I was struck one night, when he had spent an hour telling us how much he didn't believe in God, when I asked him, if it meant so little why did he return to the topic over and over? He said "But what's the point in any conversation - when if there actually is a God... then it's the only thing to talk about, I'm surprised people talk about anything else".

Helped me hugely in my faith did my atheist friend.

Prayer:

Lord, let me learn from all of your creation

From my brother who greets me with "Peace be upon you"

May peace be upon me.

From my sister who reminds me to think outside of my self and to focus not upon worldly things; that losing our attachment to these brings the greatest peace.

And from the grandmother who said "The secret of true success, of true happiness is this: the man or woman who asks for no return, the perfectly unselfish person is the most successful".

From the uncle who said "a humanist is someone who does the right thing even though she knows no-one is watching".

You lord are eternal and your ways are imprinted on all living things

Let them speak to us

Guide us in our understanding of your word until we meet you face to face and all things are clear.

Amen.

Fugitive dust

Isaiah 58: 9-14

Wikipedia says Dust is made of fine particles of matter. It generally consists of particles in the atmosphere that come from various sources such as soil, dust lifted by weather (an aeolian process), volcanic eruptions, and pollution. Dust in homes, offices, and other human environments contains small amounts of plant pollen, human and animal hairs, textile fibers, paper fibers, minerals from outdoor soil, human skin cells, burnt meteorite particles, and many other materials which may be found in the local environment.

Fugitive dust falling on the just and unjust alike
Falling on all creation
Falling on the whole world
Stuff of stars

Convulsions of the earth
Cast high in the air and blown around the world.

You and I made of stardust from the heart of the supernova, warmed by the heat of many
suns

Prayer:

God's creation
Made incarnate in the world
We are all the same
King or beggar
Servant, thief,
Refugee or conqueror
On the up
On the down
Just staying still
One beating heart
with the one great rhythm
of the one great song
Lord help us to love ourselves and others as one and the same
Amen.



SONGS

I heard the voice of Jesus say
Amazing grace
Be thou my vision
How deep the Father's love for us
Immortal, invisible
Spirit of God unseen as the wind

Heaven Touching Earth

During Lent we are challenging our strict boundaries between earth and heaven, the physical and the spiritual. We are going to engage with the rich tradition of Celtic Christianity, contemporary interest in mindfulness, wellbeing and spirituality, and consider new ways of being church.

We are inspired by Ian Bradley's book on Celtic Christianity: 'Colonies of Heaven' that explores Celtic models of church and considers what if any might fit the church today. Bradley suggests while many have romanticised Celtic Christianity, there is enough historical evidence to allow 21st century Christians to engage with material that can inspire a new generation of Christians to embrace a more inclusive, welcoming, and grace filled Christianity.

Research is showing an ever increasing interest in topics like wellbeing and mindfulness. While many no longer attend church, a great number of former church members still describe themselves as Christians and an ever increasing number of the younger generation are exploring spirituality through music, or discussion groups online, or by their commitment to justice and equality in our world. Many of these topics form the substance of their regular daily conversations among friends and family.





Psalm 19: 1-4

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

The Rhythm of Blessedness

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

The prophet in a matter of fact way spells out the consequences of ignoring the maker's instructions. He is not saying that difficulties will never come to those who seek to obey God. He is suggesting that being rooted and planted in the will of God is like being sustained and strengthened in times of trouble and difficulty. The rhythm of blessedness comes from keeping good company. Knowing all will be well because God has the last word. It is this that sustains us. Knowing this is the key to understanding the rhythm of blessing.

Prayer:

We pray with the faithful who feel hard pressed
For those who feel they've seldom been blessed
Let heaven touch earth and give them rest

We pray with those who speak out for peace
The children whose voices are counted the least
Let heaven touch earth and give them their say

We pray with the lonely, despised, and confused
Walking a road they didn't choose
May heaven touch earth and grant them courage

We pray with all who need sanctuary and food
For those struggling to keep on the road
May heaven touch earth and grant them strength.

Amen.

Silence and Space

Psalm 19: 1-4

"The language of God is silence" so says Thomas Merton, yet many of us crave sound. We need it to fill the gaps, the emptiness. The Psalmist points out for us that speech is unnecessary with God, remember the super-moon that recently called our attention to the Creator? Have you seen the snowdrop, the crocus, pushing through the months of Winter weather again?

Accept God's invitation to commune... listen... for heaven touches earth when we are silent long enough to allow the Holy One to fill the voids in our lives.

The strength of the dry stone wall is the strategically placed spaces. Where are we creating space to receive God?

Prayer:

Eternal God, give me eyes to see Your speech,

ears to hear Your voice,

a heart to love steadfastly and a mind to obey without question.

Amen.

Our heart is restless...

John 8: 51

"Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death".

As Saint Augustine says: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you". We are made to live in fellowship with God and when we are estranged from him we are not at peace.

We spend our lives seeking, unsatisfied, until we realise that true peace and true satisfaction lies in relationship with God. In this world that relationship is always mediated through the cacophony of the world's voices and this makes it difficult often to see God, or hear his voice, or sense his presence.

Taking time out from the world is essential for our spiritual wellbeing, but also for our physical wellbeing. Jesus, fully human, tempted in every way as we are, nevertheless found time to celebrate his humanity in the presence of his Father.

Prayer:

Loving Father,
help us to see what is important
and prioritise that
over what is urgent.
Help us to find that quiet space
to rest in your presence.
As we draw closer to you in this life
the next life becomes ever more real.
As we spend time in your presence
getting to know you
becoming one with you
so death recedes
becoming simply
a step on the journey
rather than a hurdle to be crossed.
Life segues into eternal life
seamlessly.
Amen.

Shekinah Glory

Psalm 106: 20

I love the British Sign Language (BSL) sign for 'glory' which involves gently wiggling fingers and a lifted expression on the face. BSL is a 'positional language' so where and how you place or move a sign affects its meaning. The sign 'glory' is particularly lovely when combined with the criss crossing arms of the sign 'change' - for example when singing and signing the line 'changed from glory into glory' in the song 'Love Divine'. The closed fists open into fingers doing the physical equivalent of a shimmer as your arms change places and your face lifts.

Shekinah glory - the glory of God dwelling within and among us (Shekinah is an English transliteration of a Hebrew word for dwelling) - needs more than just words to express it. It needs our whole bodies.

Why then do we so often settle for an imitation of glory? We exchange something that should thrill our souls for something that temporarily pleases us.

We shouldn't exchange our lives for anything but the real thing.

Prayer:

Glorious God,
When my eyes are drawn by an imitation of you;
When I am tempted to worship at the altar of youth,
or wealth, or fame, or popularity;
When I take good things, like family, or work, or happiness
and mistake them for you,
Let me feel the unmistakable presence of your glory
so I may know what is real,
and worship you alone.
Amen.

Like a child

2 Kings 5: 1-15

If I had been kidnapped by a foreign army and forced to serve in the household of that army's renowned General, I may not have been as gracious as the unnamed young servant girl of that General's wife. But this child sets the example for adults (just as Jesus suggests in Matthew 18) in telling her mistress of the Prophet who can heal her husband.

Rich in every way possible, Naaman thinks that status and wealth will cause Elisha to meet with him face to face and call on God to heal.

Poor Naaman, his expectations are skewed, and his pride leads him to anger. But he listens to his servants, he shows he is capable of humility, he understands that compared to God he is nothing... yet to God he is everything.

When we glimpse the vastness of God's love for us, when we are humble like a child, then we can receive from God's abundance.

Prayer:

Holy God,

give me eyes to see Your steadfast love,

ears to hear Your call,

a heart to receive Your love

and a mind set on following You.

Amen.

Something to declare

Ephesians 2: 8-10

I have always said that I'd make a lousy smuggler. I instinctively feel guilty when a customs officer looks at me, even if I have absolutely nothing to declare. It must show on my face, because I seem to get searched quite a lot.

To the anxious mind, the notion that the spirit 'convicts' us of sin doesn't sound reassuring - because we all know that punishment follows a judgement of guilt.

But what if our conviction was more of a diagnosis? What if what followed was not punishment, but healing? Recognition of our faults, our flaws, our distance from God, can be the first step in developing a life enhancing faith.

Prayer:

There's a burning in my heart, Lord
It's telling me that I'm not what I should be
Not what I could be.

It's stirring up my dusty complacency.
It's making me question,
who I am,
what I've done.

It's making me wonder if I could be more,
more than the selfish impulses I try to smuggle past others
so that they might think well of me.

It's making me want to say I have something to declare
to unpack it all in front of you,
not in fear, but in trust
that you will not leave me where I am.

Amen.

Blinded to grace

Romans 11: 6

“And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace”.

The world does not understand grace. Grace is not just, it is not fair. Grace does not give us what we deserve. Grace does not count our misdemeanours or keep a record of wrongs. Grace is the undeserved love and mercy of God. It is that quality of God which sent Jesus, while we were sinners, to love us, to seek us out, to redeem our flesh by taking it on himself, to save us.

The world is suspicious of grace but if more of our relationships were characterised by grace then how could the world resist!

Prayer:

Grace-full Father,
we cannot understand
your capacity to offer us grace.
We struggle
to offer grace to others.
We want justice.
We want wrongs to be righted.
We want punishment for misdemeanours.
Especially when they are committed by others
and we are on the receiving end!
But that is not your way.
You offer us endless love and mercy.
Help us to be as generous with others
as you are with us.
Amen.



SONGS

I heard the voice of Jesus say
Amazing grace
Be thou my vision
How deep the Father's love for us
Immortal, Invisible
Spirit of God unseen as the wind

The Communion Of The Saints

As we near Holy Week and anticipating Easter, we contemplate the Communion of Saints that has gone on before us. Through the week we encourage you to think about ancient and contemporary saints.

1. Communion of the Humble. What it means to be part of the Communion of the Saints.
2. Communion of the Generous. The generosity of God in the heart of a human.
3. Communion of the Weak. It is in our weakness that we encounter the power of God.
4. Communion of the Broken. Being opened up to understand what it means to be totally open to God's will.
5. Communion of the Redeemed. Being brought back around the table of redemption.
6. Communion of the Rejected. Jesus stands with those who know the pain and hurt of rejection.
7. Communion of the Secret Believers and Doubters. The reality of following Jesus, with its fears and challenges. It is truly a mind blowing idea we are invited to believe. God has become one of us, God in Jesus Christ has opened a way in which heaven can touch earth.





Hebrews 12: 1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Communion of the Humble

Isaiah 50: 6

This historic and beautiful phrase, communion of saints, speaks of the way in which all Christians, past and present, form one single fellowship of love. It recognises that Christ is the centre of our unity, and that through participation (communion) in him we come into fellowship with one another, sisters and brothers in God's one family. However isolated we may sometimes feel, we are never in fact alone. As a New Testament writer expresses it, 'we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1). Our lives, in Christ, are forever intertwined. We are made for togetherness.

This vast Christian fellowship is at core a 'communion of the humble'. It has to be, for in Jesus, uniquely, heaven has touched earth, and comprehensive self-humbling is the shape that took. Our Isaiah reading, one of four famous 'servant songs' in that book, anticipates this key New Testament theme. For Jesus the way to the throne was via a manger, a donkey ride and a cross (see John 12: 12-16; Philippians 2: 5-11).

As for Jesus, so for us his followers, the way up is always first the way down. 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...' (Philippians 2: 5). Someone remarked, 'Pride builds walls; humility builds bridges'. The saints of past ages agreed. St Bernard used to say, 'The three most important virtues are humility, humility, humility'. Cuthbert, a great Celtic saint, gives us this wise advice: 'Do not ever think yourselves better than the rest of your companions who share the same faith'.

Prayer:

Humble Lord

We recall how you entered Jerusalem on a donkey on your way to a cross. Your thoughts were entirely for others and not for yourself. Your loving humility awes us into silence.

We confess that we have too often been guilty of the sin of pride, thinking too highly of ourselves and looking down on others. Have mercy on us.

Give us true humility and lowliness of heart, a willingness to listen to your voice and the voice of others. Make us like you, Jesus.

Amen.

Communion of the Generous

Isaiah 42: 3

Amy Carmichael served as a missionary in India for 55 years without any furlough. She once wrote, 'You can give without loving. But you cannot love without giving'. In a saint like Amy Carmichael we witness heaven touching earth in an unmistakable way. The greatest example of generous, self-giving love is that of God himself. In sending Jesus, he has given us everything.

From the first, Christians have seen this divine generosity powerfully reflected in Isaiah's 'servant songs'. The servant of the Lord comes as the loving Creator's answer to the world's sin-caused predicament. He brings the light of truth in a world of darkness, the joy of liberation to a world of enslavement, justice in a world of oppression, healing for a world of dis-ease, and ultimately the renewal of the whole creation, at last filled with the glory of God.

It's a vision of unbounded generosity and it is put into effect by one who embodies servanthood at its most committed and compassionate. Little wonder that Christians have always seen Jesus represented in Isaiah's 'suffering servant'.

To such generosity there can be only one right response. The extravagant action of a deeply thankful Mary of Bethany (John 12) vividly pictures this. Her service to Jesus holds nothing back, even when it leaves her exposed to ridicule.

Along with the example of Mary, let the words of the 6th century Irish nun, St Ita of Killeedy, challenge us today: 'Three things that please God are true faith in God with a pure heart, a simple life with a grateful spirit, and generosity inspired by love'. St Columba, for his part, offers us this encouragement: 'He who does good for others will find his own redoubled many-fold'.

Prayer:

Generous God

In gratitude for your amazing love in Jesus, help us in his service to live lives of grace-filled generosity and kindness, attentive above all to the needs of those most bruised and broken along life's way.

Amen.

Communion of the Weak

Psalm 71: 9

Martin Luther, the 16th century Reformer, often remarked that he far preferred to hear of the weaknesses of the saints than of their heroism. Their weaknesses, he explained, 'buoy me up in a wonderful manner and give great consolation'. Observing the way God's grace sustained them, Luther commented, 'I conclude that there is no need for me to despair either'.

The truth, that in weakness lies our strength, is one of the strange paradoxes of Christian discipleship. The troubled person who wrote Psalm 71 describes himself as 'a portent to many' (verse 7), meaning that he saw his suffering as deserved divine punishment. Our thoughts inevitably turn to the experience of Jesus himself in Holy Week. Good Friday is the ultimate display of strength through weakness.

St Paul prayed repeatedly for the removal of a debilitating trouble in his life. The response he was given opened a whole new window for him onto the experience of suffering: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (See 2 Corinthians 12: 9).

Is there something in your own situation or circumstances today that you find weakening and long to have removed? God's saints, with one voice, encourage us to bring these to him in simple, trusting faith. In that spirit of absolute dependence we will discover God's power at work in and through us in remarkable ways. As St Thérèse of Lisieux put it, 'It is my weakness that gives me all my strength'. So it has always been.

Prayer:

Vulnerable Lord

In unfathomable love for us and for your world, you came among us in weakness. And yet in your weakness we see displayed the power that redeemed a world.

Help us not to be afraid of weakness, but in communion with you and all your saints to gladly embrace it in childlike trust. Through us let the power of your love flow out to embrace others and to build your kingdom on earth.

For Jesus' sake.

Amen.

Communion of the Broken

Jeremiah 18: 6

'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Psalm 51: 17).

The Church of England's Book of Common Prayer offers this verse as the Opening Sentence for Morning and Evening Prayer through Lent. Brokenness of this kind does not come easily to any of us. It is the opposite of arrogance or pride and is the necessary condition of God's refreshing presence with and among us. The communion of saints has always been a communion of the broken.

Jeremiah's picture of the potter at his wheel is a graphic illustration of what this means. As the malleable clay is worked by the potter into his chosen shape and design, so God wants to shape his people in his own likeness to serve his purposes of love and to reflect his glory. To reject God's good will is as absurd as a vessel that argues against the potter. Sometimes we are like that. God can only use us when we have been 'broken' - made passionate about doing his will rather than our own. Like Jesus.

A great saint of the 19th century, George Müller once said, 'There was a day when I died. Died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure ... and since then I have studied to show myself approved only to God'.

Brokenness means 'Not I but Christ' (Galatians 2: 20). The road to glory lies in our willingness to become the servant of all. Like Jesus, who for us was broken on the cross.

Prayer:

Weeping God

Your tears fall on us when in selfish pride we insist on having our way and not yours. Give us the brokenness of spirit which submits joyfully to your will and to which you are always near.

Shape us into vessels that will carry the treasure of the gospel to others, so that broken lives may be healed and a broken world made whole.

Spirit of God, breathe your life into us and fill us with faith, love and hope.

Amen.

Communion of the Redeemed

1 Corinthians 11: 26

The church is never more clearly the communion of saints than when we come together around the Lord's Supper. Here, as many will testify, is one of those 'thin places' of which our Celtic forebears spoke, where 'the curtain between heaven and earth seems almost transparent'. The Franciscan Richard Rohr calls such 'places' in life 'the edge', and urges the need for us to live right there, on the spiritual edge of things.

The thinnest of all 'thin places' was the cross of Calvary where Jesus, God incarnate, died for the salvation of the world. In that awesome scene, heaven and earth were fully interlocked in the achieving of our redemption.

As we come together to share the hospitality of the Table - remembering Jesus, celebrating God's forgiveness and grace, rejoicing in our fellowship with all the saints, and anticipating the coming day when the new creation will be fully realised - the living Christ himself is with us.

The communion of saints is the communion of eternal gratitude 'to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood' (Revelation 1: 5). At the Supper we look forward together to the joy of unimpeded communion with him and with 'all the saints in Christ Jesus' in a fully redeemed and renewed cosmos, in which the Lamb will be all the glory.

Prayer:

Hospitable God

We praise you for your redeeming, welcoming love. We cannot begin to understand what it cost to accomplish the salvation of the world. You welcome us as we are to the Table of your grace, and by your Spirit you transform us into image-bearers of your Son.

May the hospitality you extend to us be reflected in the compassion, care and welcome we offer to one another. May we see it as our highest privilege to be the servant of others, for the sake of our Saviour, the greatest servant of all.

Amen.

Communion of the Rejected

Isaiah 53: 3

Few experiences have the capacity to hurt like that of rejection. Rejection hurts horribly. It can happen in the playground when a child is the last to be picked for a team. It is felt when we are stood up by a date, repeatedly turned down in applying for work, passed over for promotion, scorned by others for who we are and what we believe. Most painful of all is rejection experienced from those who are close to us and whom we love. Such rejections can dictate and embitter our whole approach to living.

On Good Friday, of all days, we remember that the greatest example of rejection the world has known is that of Jesus. 'What was the life of Christ but a perpetual humiliation?' asked St Vincent de Paul. This came to its excruciating climax in the events of Holy Week. Betrayed by one of his followers, and denied by one who had sworn undying loyalty (see John 18: 1-18), on the cross he experienced the desolating sense of being rejected by God himself, crying out in the words of Psalm 22: 1. It was as if every human experience of rejection was concentrated in that moment. 'Upon the cross of suffering Jesus bore every pain on behalf of Adam's seed,' said St Kevin of Glendalough.

Over the centuries, disciples of Jesus have often known the fellowship of Christ's own suffering, not least in the experience of hostility and persecution for his sake. The rejected Christ stands with all who endure this desolating pain and hurt. And at his cross we find the forgiveness we need and the assurance that life and hope and love – not rejection - will have the final word.

Prayer:

Rejected Lord

Your cry of desolation on the cross both humbles us and gives us hope that in the Communion of the Rejected our deep hurts too may be transformed.

Thank you that you understand and that you walk side by side with all who trust you, through every dark experience of life. Help us to forgive, as we have been forgiven, to pray as Jesus did for those who reject us, and to show love and mercy for his sake.

Amen.

Communion of the Secret Believers and Doubters

John 19: 38-42

Being a follower of Jesus is the most rewarding and joy filled life imaginable. It is also the most demanding and challenging.

The claims made by the Christian faith about Jesus are stupendous: he is in person the meeting place of heaven and earth, the incarnate God whose name is Immanuel ('God is with us'). God's love in Jesus is the hope of the world. Christians can be troubled with doubt and fear of openly identifying with such astonishing claims.

Two people we meet in John's gospel were like that: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. As members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, a body hostile to Jesus, they found it prudent in the early days of their discipleship to keep it a secret. But this could not last. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that ultimately there can be 'no such thing as secret discipleship, because either the secrecy will destroy the discipleship or the discipleship the secrecy'. Remarkably, in the darkest hour of crisis when other disciples ran away in terror, it was Joseph and Nicodemus, together with the women, who stepped forward into the light to give service to Jesus.

Our times call for humble yet bold Christian witness like theirs. The gospel of God's love in Jesus is the world's one hope. In the face of that challenge and responsibility, are we allowing the cross to dispel our fear and doubt, and our discipleship to remove the secrecy?

Prayer:

Fear-dispelling God

In our discipleship we confess that too often we allow doubts to displace faith and fear to oust trust in you. We keep our heads down instead of bearing witness to your grace.

May the love and sacrifice of Jesus' cross impress upon us, as it did Joseph and Nicodemus, to witness and serve with humility and boldness. Let perfect love cast out fear. Make us instruments of your peace in this broken world.

Thank you for your promise to walk with us every step of this journey so that we need neither to be troubled or afraid.

In Jesus' strong name we pray.

Amen.



Songs:

In Christ alone

When I survey the wondrous cross

Ye gates, lift up your heads on high

Jesus calls us here to meet him

Holy, holy, holy, my heart, my heart adores you

CROSS REACH

Care you can put your faith in

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