

Day 1 – John 1:1-5 'In the beginning'

When does the good news about Jesus begin? I wonder what your first reaction would be to that question... At the manger, when Jesus is born? When Caesar Augustus announces the census which takes the young couple Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? When the angel Gabriel visits Mary 9 months previously, or when the angel visits old Zechariah?

Perhaps your mind turns back to the Old Testament, to the great Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, or Micah, or Ezekiel. Or back further still, to God's promise to King David that one of his descendants would rule forever.

Many answers, good answers: but they'd all be wrong. St John gives us the real answer, the first 3 words of his gospel: **In the beginning.... (the beginning)**

Begin at the very beginning, that's a very good place to start, as Maria von Trapp quite sensibly reminded us all those years ago. And for us the beginning of our good news is not Bethlehem, or Nazareth, or Isaiah or even King David. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (v1).

Jesus is not God's plan B or C or whatever plan God decided on about OBC. *Jesus was always plan A.* God himself, co-existent with the Father and the Spirit, equal in glory and status: God from God, light from light, begotten not made, as the old creed puts it.

As we begin this new series in John, today let's spend a few moments reflecting on the awesome mystery that Jesus was always God's plan A. That what we enjoy *now* has been planned from the beginning of time – that *we are part of something so much bigger than ourselves*. That the glorious, beautiful relationship of love which God has within himself is what we're invited into. That the light which God also has within himself – and which Jesus shines (v5) – is our light as human beings too.

And that God's plan for us was always life. This is the life which Jesus graciously and joyfully gives to all who seek him (v4). May these awesome truths stir our hearts to praise and thanksgiving; and may God's abundant, eternal life shine in us and through us today.

Day 2 – John 1:1-9 'A light in the darkness'

'The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.' (v9) But why did the light come? To answer that, I'm going to take you back about 10 years to a time when my children were small and we were in a supermarket. Isaac at the time was obsessed with torches. It seemed like every time we entered a shop which sold any sort of hardware, we would come out with another type of torch. And so one summer's day, in the middle of the day, when it's about as bright as it can possibly be, there we were, standing at the tills about to buy another torch with whatever was left of Isaac's pocket money. Which we did.

And as we left the shop Isaac grabbed my arm and shouted: 'Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!'

It's great isn't it, when your kids are young and they think you can do *everything*. You not only look after them and play games and make their food and make them feel safe, but you can make it *dark*, you probably built the house they live in and made the car you drive. Electricity comes out of your fingertips and the planets move at your command. They don't know that your knees are shot and you can put your back out just bending down to tie your shoelaces and you can barely rewire a plug, let alone build a house. You're daddy, you can do *everything*: 'Make it dark, Daddy, make it dark!'

The purpose of light is darkness. No point in light otherwise. That was true in the beginning: 'The earth was formless and empty, and God said "Let there be light."' And it's true now – as St John says: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' (v5)

Looking around our world, there's enough darkness, isn't there? And if we're honest, we know the darkness is not just out there, it's *in here* – in our hearts. Greed, compassion fatigue, anger, pride... whatever it is, it's a darkness that needs the light.

This is why the light came: to bring us life, to put an end to our darkness – 'that life was the light of all humankind.' (v4) And that light still shines in the darkness. It shines today, it shines in the hearts of millions around the world – and the darkness does *not* overcome it. Never has, never will.

Today, let's give thanks for that light, a light which never fades or blow out, which brings us warmth and peace, guidance and security – as light always does. And perhaps take a few moments too, to pray that this beautiful light draws others to Jesus, people that you love.

Day 3 – John 1:9-13 'Children of God'

In 2015 Cristiano Ronaldo, the world's most famous footballer, disguised himself and went out to play football in one of Madrid's central plazas for an hour. He just put on a wig, a beard, some old clothes and some extra padding on his tummy. Then he took a chair, a dog, a football (obviously) and a cardboard box for tips as he tried to coax passers-by to join in a game, or to reward him for doing some trick with the ball.

Almost no-one gave him the time of day. Most walked by quickly, embarrassed at the thought they might be asked for money by someone who looked more or less like a tramp. A few joined in for a bit, and then made their excuses. Eventually one little boy joined in properly, passing the ball around with this stranger and trying to tackle him. After a while, the stranger picked up his ball, asked the boy's name, signed the ball... and then took off the disguise bit by bit.

As you can imagine, at that point pandemonium broke out. All those who had been rushing to avoid him now stopped and got out their phones. The cafes around the plaza emptied into the square, and the last scene on the video – which had been secretly filmed the whole time – was of Ronaldo walking out the square surrounded by a great entourage of dozens of fans.

In our passage today, St John talks about another quiet entry into human life. Someone much greater, but who was largely neither recognised (v10), nor received (v11). Indeed, unlike Ronaldo, when this great being revealed his true identity he suffered rejection more than adulation. His entourage included opponents as well as followers.

But today I want us to put ourselves in the place of that little boy, suddenly encountering the great man. How would you feel? The glorious news of this passage is that what Jesus offers those who receive him is not just a signed football and an unforgettable moment, but something much deeper: *the right to become children of God* (v12). To be adopted into God's global family. To be, literally, 'born of God' (v13).

The face of the little lad just after he realised that he'd met his hero was an image which has stayed with me: he was overcome with emotion and buried his face in his mum's coat. I pray for myself – and for you too – that we would experience that same sense of wonder afresh at this wonderful, glorious, incomparable truth: that those who receive Jesus become children of God. How amazing is that!

Day 4 – John 1:14-18 'God in the flesh'

'The Word became flesh.' One of the most famous phrases in the bible, and the climax of the church's Advent readings in December every year, as our waiting for Christmas turns into the real thing. God comes to earth, divinity meets humanity – the Word became flesh.

But what does that really mean? Many people have offered good metaphors over the years for what it must have felt for God to cram all of that divine life and power into a human body. C.S. Lewis observed that if you want to know what it was like for God to become a human, imagine what it would be like for you to become a slug! And that's not a bad approximation.

But let's go further. The problem for us when we encounter this great phrase is that we're so familiar with the sanitised Christmas version of it. We so often turn the nativity into a fairy story, and then add layers of Victorian imagery. We sing carols about snow and Bethlehem sounding remarkably like an English village, and a Jesus who doesn't cry, but looks adoringly into the eyes of his mother. And it's all so lovely.... but almost certainly bears no relation to reality! (Please try to forget that last sentence before December begins 😊)

The Word became flesh. A real person. Why does that matter? Because it means *we worship a real God for real people with real lives*. Max Lucado once said that it's much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. But look at what we lose when we do. We lose a real Saviour for real people – and what a loss that is.

I don't know about you, but there's mess and muck in my life as I imagine there is in yours. And like most of us, I want to worship a real God who meets me in my real life – in January's overdraft, and February's redundancy, and March's illness of a loved one, and April's marital struggles, and May's child with a drug habit, and June's celebration of a big birthday, and July's exam results, and August's family holiday, and September's new school, and October's health scare, and November's major car bill and December's annual merry-go-round of the Christmas consumer machine. And everything in-between.

'The Word became flesh' means that there is a real God for real people. We can take our muck and our mess to him. He knows, he understands, he cares. And he has the power to change it, to change us – if only we'll let him.

Today, let's give thanks that our amazing, real God became flesh – and let's offer to him in prayer all the real concerns of our lives. After all, he's been there, too.

Day 5 – John 1:14-18 (2) 'Grace upon grace'

Grace. The beating heart of our faith. What Philip Yancey calls the 'last, best word of the English language.' The most unique of all the great truths of Christianity. That God gives us what we don't deserve. That Jesus takes our place, and exchanges his death for our life.

Grace is the beginning and the end – it's where we first encounter God as He truly is, and what we cling on to as our life nears its end. We never move away from it, swap it or graduate to something better.

And today, St John finds a simple way to describe our lifelong journey of grace – it's not in all bible translations, but a literal version of v16 is this: *'From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.'*

Grace upon grace. That is the plumb line of our lives. And in this short reflection today, I can do no better than just encourage you to spend a few minutes thinking about God's grace in your life. When did you first meet God? How has God met with you since? How has He blessed you? What 'graces' can you celebrate? What troubles has God through you through, with sufficient grace? And where do you need 'grace upon grace' now?

We can never exhaust the depths of God's grace. May God sink that beautiful truth deep into our hearts, and fill us again with joy and hope.

Day 6 – John 1:19-20 'Pointing in the right direction'

My old bishop used to joke that every clergy person should have a sign written prominently near their desk saying, 'I am not the Messiah!'

It's easy to joke about budding 'Messiah complexes' – especially for anyone in the caring professions – but John the Baptist's clear pronouncement in v20 of today's reading is worth a second look. It encourages all of us to ask ourselves the searching question – where do *we* look for salvation, for meaning, even for solutions in our lives?

In our reading, the situation is delicate: the people are looking for a saviour, and in John they think they might just have found the person for the job. Intense, holy, passionate, inspiring – everything a prophet should be. But John knows who he is and what he's there to do, and more importantly he also knows who the people should be looking to instead... we'll get to that over the next few days.

But if tomorrow's reflection is all about the value of knowing who we are, *it's also pretty crucial to know who we're not*. So much of human existence is built around the idea of solving things ourselves. As a culture we crave control. We buy products that 'put you in control'. We sit on the sofa with the remote... you guessed it. For the last 400 or so years Western culture has pursued a vision of life which puts human beings at the centre. We are all mini-messiahs.

But John knows better. Talented as he is, visionary as he is, anointed as he is – he also knows what he is not. He is *not* the Messiah. He is not the answer to all things. He himself needs to look beyond his own existence to Someone greater.

Maybe there's something in that for us too. Perhaps today is a chance to reflect again as to whether we've been subtly caught up in thinking that it's all on us. That *we* have to solve all our problems, that this thing or that relationship can't work unless *we* are the indispensable cog in the wheel.

But you are not the Messiah, either.

And that's good. In fact, it's great! Because there is One who is. And you can take all your pressures and worries, all your problems and even your successes to Him.

So as you start the week, take a moment to remind yourself that it isn't all on you. And be thankful! 'Cast all your burdens on God, because He cares for you.'

Day 7 – John 1:21-23 'Knowing who you are'

Who are you? That's an interesting question to ask, isn't it? How we answer gives away a lot about how we see life. Do we just think of our name; or maybe our nationality; perhaps our job; or a key relationship which defines us – mother, father, carer; perhaps our main attributes and qualities?

So much of life is about identity. The big crime of the moment is identity theft. I don't know about you but I get endless emails telling me how to recognise it – hopefully most of the emails themselves are genuine! Who knows?

But it seems to me that a lot of us struggle with identity theft at a much deeper level than offshore criminals trying to get our passwords and credit card details. Our culture gives far too much meaning to money and possessions, to success and image – and those of us who find ourselves lacking in any of these areas may feel unsure of who we are.

Similarly, we may suddenly find an identity crisis after losing a job, or watching a close relationship turn sour. Who are we, really?

The bible gives us wonderful answers to that question. And it points us ultimately to Christ, in whom we can find all the security in our identity that this world affords. As James Bryan Smith says, when asked the question who are you?', every follower of Jesus can say: *'I am [your name] in whom Christ dwells, and I live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God.'*

Just let that sink in for a moment. *You* are a precious child of God, uniquely loved and valuable – so precious, in fact, that the Son of God Himself dwells in you. And you live in the strongest and most secure location there is – the realm of the Almighty Lord of the Universe.

Your income, your status, your image – none of that matters to God. It doesn't affect your position in the kingdom, your forgiveness, salvation, eternal future or your access to God. To paraphrase L'Oreal: *You are worth it.*

In our reading today, John the Baptist has a similar clarity. As we saw yesterday, he knows very well who he *isn't*. But he also knows who he *is*: his identity as God's voice, and his role as God's herald of the in-breaking kingdom (v23). His identity directed his life and gave him great confidence to live in obedience to his calling. May that be ours, too!

Today, spend a few moments letting your identity in Christ sink in again. You are ____ in whom Christ dwells, and you live in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God. Repeat. Repeat again (!). And let the indwelling Christ give you strength to live out your identity today.

Day 8 – John 1:24-28 'The unknown One among us'

Many of you will know the famous story of the work of Bletchley Park during the Second World War. Their remarkable work shortened the conflict by an estimated 2 years and saved up to 2 million lives. Somehow 10,000 people worked there – round the clock, every day of the year – and their work was kept a secret... I've always thought there was something deeply providential in that.

Less well known is the fact that Bletchley Park had several outstations doing some of the work. One of those was Wavendon House in our parish – a large home which used to be owned by the Hoare family and whose outbuildings were converted into a de-coding unit, working with messages sent via Enigma machines. What was fascinating about this was that – unlike the heavy security surrounding Bletchley Park – there was no security at all protecting this unit. There was at least one Enigma machine on-site, but the place just looked like a non-descript barn. Those who worked there and their incredibly important work were simply hiding in plain sight.

John the Baptist alluded to a similar situation in today's reading. Someone much greater than him was already among them – but was, like Outstation X, currently hiding in plain sight. His time would soon come, of course – but, as yet, he remained 'one you do not know' (v26).

It reminds us that *God's work must be done in God's way* – and the way of God is not always ours. The leaders of the day expected God's appointed rescuer to come with a fanfare, or at least with physical power and prowess. They wanted shock and awe, unmistakable proof. But *God comes to them – and us – in humility*. Where we look for thunder and lightning, instead we get a gentle whisper. Where we want glory and majesty, instead Jesus wraps a towel around his waist and washes our feet.

Recognising the gentle, humble work of God in us and among us can sometimes be tricky. Part of the journey of the spiritual life is to attune ourselves to listen well, to reflect deeply, that *we might hear the gentle whisper, and see what God is up to*. So many of those around us sadly miss it – Jesus is ever-present, but remains 'one they do not know'. But by the grace of God, He is so patient, and slowly but surely we can discern and truly know 'the One we did not know'.

Take a few moments today to listen, and reflect – Jesus stands among us as surely as He did in the days of John. Can you see him? Where is He at work in you? What is He whispering to you? And pray for more grace to see Him and all that He is doing, in you and through you.

Day 9 – John 1:29-30 'The Lamb of God'

A few years ago, when our children were still in primary school, we took the chance while on holiday in Devon to visit a sheep auction. It was very exciting watching herds being led into the small arena and then seeing the various bidders in action, as the auctioneer kept up a furious pace with the vocals. However, our kids found it upsetting. Once they realised that many of the bidders worked for food processing companies, the outcome of what was happening – and what awaited the sheep – slowly dawned on them. In particular they became distressed watching a solitary sheep who formed one lot and was sold for just £2. We haven't eaten lamb as a family since. (Though I must confess that Alise and I really miss it!)

Of all farm animals, many of us have a particular fascination with sheep. Their fluffy coats and air of vulnerability draw out an emotional response greater than with, say, pigs or cows. So perhaps we find it especially poignant that when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he utters the famous phrase of today's reading: *'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'* (v29)

Nowadays we are so familiar with the idea of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb that it's easy to lose the dramatic impact of what John is saying. Here is the Messiah, God's chosen one, the one John has just borne witness to as someone so great that he's not fit to tie up his sandals. The one he goes on to say pre-existed humanity, who has been promised from long ago. This is a great human being, surely? Someone we would expect to be strong, powerful, maybe even slightly intimidating...

Instead, John turns all our instincts upside-down and uses an image which speaks of *Jesus' vulnerability, his lowliness*, the price he would have to pay for our freedom. The blood of the Lamb saved the people at Passover. And the blood of the Lamb, John says, still saves today.

Normally I like to suggest practical ways to apply what we read – but today, the best, perhaps the only, thing we should do is give thanks for our Saviour. The One who surpasses all. The One who takes away our sin. All hail the Lamb!

Day 10 – John 1:29-34 'Deeply dipped'

Every so often an innovation comes along which changes the game. The product remains the same, but once this innovation is launched, what was once perfectly acceptable is no longer adequate. Think graphite tennis rackets replacing wooden ones at the end of the 70s/early 80s. Think the iPhone being launched in 2007. It's still the same thing, but at the same time entirely different.

In the journey of faith, the coming of Christ produces the same effect. It's still the same God we worship – yesterday, today and forever – but the New Covenant gives us direct access to this God in a new way. And the sign and seal of this deeper, more intimate relationship with God is baptism. The word means 'dipped', but as the passage makes clear we need two 'dippings'. John baptism was with water (v26, v31, v33) – a baptism of cleansing and repentance. An external sign of an inward attitude – profound, yes; important, certainly; but with no power in itself to change the heart. It relied on human effort to achieve the intention.

Jesus comes, though, with a game-changer. Jesus will baptise – 'dip' – us with the Spirit (v33). In other words, *the presence of God coming into our hearts, the power of His love transforming us from the inside out*. It's a game-changer.

And what held true then still holds true today. We all need *both* baptisms – of water and Spirit – but it is the latter which empowers us day by day. Water baptism is about initiation. Spirit baptism is about intimacy. And the great news is that this intimacy is available to all believers, everywhere, every day. It's not a one-off, but a continuous flow of the water of life into our hearts.

It also casts us back to God's grace. It's so easy for us to try and rely solely on our efforts and good intentions. But even one of the great holy people – John the Baptist – knew that it wasn't enough. We need to be deeply dipped in God's Spirit.

So today, give thanks that you are not alone, your walk with God does not depend all on your own efforts. What a relief! And pray to be filled – dipped – again in the love, presence and power of God by the Holy Spirit.

Day 11 – John 1:35-42 'One simple act'

Andrew is one of the 'forgotten' disciples. He may be the patron saint of Scotland, but in the gospels he gets very little airtime. Second fiddle to his brother Simon, who becomes Peter, the leader of the disciples and the early church. Likewise, of the four fishermen called by Jesus at the lake, the other three – Simon, James and John – become Jesus' inner circle.

Other disciples too loom larger in our consciousness. We all know about Matthew – the tax collector turned gospel writer – Doubting Thomas and of course Judas Iscariot. Even later disciples like Jesus' brother James and Philip (not the one in John 1) have a bigger role in the Book of Acts and the leadership of the early church.

But Andrew does one earth-changing thing. One simple act that alters the course of history. And we find it here. *He brought his brother Simon to Jesus* (v42). In Andrew's one recorded piece of speech in the gospels, just five words in English – 'We have found the Messiah' (v41) – he reveals himself to be the first of the twelve disciples to understand who Jesus was.

And more than that, he acted on what he found. He told his brother, and introduced him to the Messiah.

One simple act. And John records it for us, I think, to show the power of simple acts. We may not have great gifts of oratory – Andrew, it appears, certainly didn't. We may be quiet people, not particularly brave or keen to share the limelight. But this passage reminds the Andrews of this world – and that is probably most of us – that everyone matters in the kingdom, *everyone has a part to play*. We can all do one simple thing. We can point the people we love to Jesus. Perhaps by a simple word, perhaps by a Christlike act, perhaps by what we don't do in their company – gossip, swear, badmouth people.

Those of us who have family and friends who don't believe know that what Andrew did is much harder than it looks. Often we hit an impasse and run out of words. We've rehearsed the same conversations so many times that we feel we can't say anything more. But let's be inspired by Andrew's example and seize faith to believe that no-one is beyond God's love; that opportunities to point people whom we love to Jesus will come round again; and that there is great power in one simple act.

Day 12 – John 1:35-42 (ii) 'Seeing beyond'

One of our largest pub chains in the UK is JD Wetherspoon. Personally I've always liked them – reliable food, no loud music you have to shout over, and fine ale. The name, too, is important. Wetherspoon, apparently, is the name of a certain teacher who taught Tim Martin – the founder and owner of the business – and told the young lad that he would never amount to anything. A multi-million pound business was Tim Martin's riposte. I have occasionally wondered whether Mr Wetherspoon drives past the hundreds of buildings that bear his name, and what that must feel like. Or indeed whether Tim Martin has found peace in his spectacular success, or if the harsh word of his teacher remains a painful wound in his life.

So often what is spoken over us when we are young sticks to our souls. Even people who know us well can, either wittingly or unwittingly, reinforce a sense of our flaws and limitations as human beings.

But Jesus sees beyond. Jesus sees what we are capable of, our God-given potential. He created us, so he knows – it's as simple as that. Andrew's brother Simon was a young fisherman. Already married, settled to a quiet life by the shores of Galilee. His name is related to the Hebrew word for 'reed'. Nothing unusual in that – but Jesus sees something greater, a future of enormous possibility. 'You will be called Cephas' (v42), meaning 'Rock' – i.e. Reedy, you're going to be Rocky.

There were times, of course, in the future when Peter's fragility ('reed-iness'?) came to the surface – when Jesus was arrested and he denied knowing his friend; or when as leader of the church he came under pressure to water down the gospel and Paul had to put him straight. But Jesus saw a different future for this young man; and, taught by the Master and empowered by the Spirit, that future came to pass. What began as a simple encounter here at the start of the gospel led to a world-changing life.

Jesus sees our potential, too – the people we were made to be, the people by God's grace that we are becoming. He is no hard taskmaster, but the constant encourager of our souls. Patient, kind, generous and ever-hopeful. Once Jesus enters our world, the task of our lives is simply to become what we already are, the person that Jesus sees and loves.

Today, take time to reflect on how Jesus sees you. What name might he have for you? What gifts is he growing? What grace is he offering you? Resolve to live as Jesus sees you, the precious, talented person that you are.

Day 13 – John 1:43-46 'Anything good?'

We are used in our culture to fame and success being connected to where we were born and brought up, the privileges (or otherwise) that we enjoyed. We hear the phrases even now in our supposedly meritocratic society: 'the old boys' network', 'not what you know but who you know', the Bullingdon Club, the Chipping Norton set, etc etc.

Some places are in and some places are, well, you know, out. Sometimes when a certain well-known person achieves great fame, their hometown is mentioned with the sort of surprise that such success could possibly have started there. We might like to think that this sort of snobbery started a couple of hundred years ago: but this attitude is not new. It's right here in our passage. It's always been there – snobbery and prejudice is as old as the hills.

When Jesus starts making waves, it becomes known that his home town is Nazareth. This is something of a surprise to many, not least Nathanael: 'Nazareth!' he sniggers contemptuously. 'Can anything good come from there?' (v46) Perhaps those of us who've made our home in Milton Keynes will immediately resonate with this kind of attitude. As someone who lived in Bristol for five years – a city that almost everyone purrs over – before moving to MK seven years ago, the contrast was quite marked.

Personally I like the negativity – those of us who live here in MK know that it's a great place to live, and don't mind at all that most people who've never been here think it's dull or soulless or whatever. It's our secret! And we're happy to keep it that way.

And today we remind ourselves that *we worship a Saviour who came from a similar background*. This area of northern Israel was known as the Decapolis, an area of 10 relatively new settlements colonised and invested in by the Romans. In other words, an ancient version of MK, and equally treated with various forms of contempt by the posher places down south.

If Jesus had been born in 21st century Britain would he have been born in MK? I don't know and there's little point in speculating. But today we can take heart knowing that we follow a Saviour like us, who knows what prejudice and snobbery were like, and who overcame everything for our sake. Can anything good come from there? Absolutely. And praise God that it did.

Perhaps today give thanks for our city, and for your home town. It's the sort of place God loves. And God is at work in it still.

Day 14 – John 1:45-49 'What's in a name?'

I learnt something new today while preparing this daily thought. I learnt that Nathanael – the subject of today's reading – is an alternative Hebrew version of my own name 'Matthew' (which comes from the Greek *Matthaios*): they both mean 'gift of God'. I could have been Nat, not Matt, and it would have been the same thing, really – there's a thought.

In ancient Hebrew culture names really mattered. They weren't usually given at birth but a bit later on, when the name could denote something of their personality or destiny. Jesus himself seems to pick up on this when he chats with Nathanael – he would have known what the name meant, and he light-heartedly draws a contrast to Jacob, who became 'Israel' and therefore the father of the nation, but who was known for deception. Nathanael, on the other hand, is 'a true Israelite (i.e. a descendant of Jacob/Israel), in whom there is no deceit' (v47).

It's funny how Jesus begins a conversation with an observation about whether Nathanael matches up to his name and his people of origin. That would be very unusual for us today, but *John 1 is all about names* – particularly the names of Jesus. John the author starts by naming Jesus as the Word (v1) and the Light (v5,7,9) and then the Son (v14,18). John the Baptist then goes on to call Jesus the Lamb of God (v29) and the Chosen One (v34). Andrew recognises Jesus as the Messiah/Christ, or Anointed One (v41); Philip, as the one prophesied in the Old Testament (v45); and then Nathanael, in this passage, as the Son of God (v49). Jesus rounds off the chapter by referring to himself as the Son of Man (v51).

John's gospel is unique in stacking all of Jesus' names upfront in chapter 1, leaving the rest of the Gospel to focus on what that means – the other gospel writers describe more of an unfolding revelation through the narrative. But the point is that all of these names mean something. They tell us who Jesus is, his unique status in all of history and cosmology, and what he came to do.

And your name means something, too. Not just your birth name, but *who you are in Christ*. Thanks to Jesus, you too are chosen, you too are God's child, you too inherit the blessings promised in God's word. If you're a follower of Jesus, this is who you are.

You may like your actual name; you may not. But today spend a moment thinking about your eternal names – *chosen child of God, inheritor of God's blessings* – that they might go deep in your soul, and that you might live out of this immensely precious identity.

Day 15 – John 1:45-51 'Greater things'

A friend of mine once told the story of taking his nephew and family to a fairground. The child would have been about 2 or 3 years old and soon after they went through the entrance they came to a small play park – you know the sort of thing, roundabouts, swings, small climbing frames. The child was very happy but eventually the rest of the party got itchy feet. There was a massive set of attractions and all kinds of exciting rides to explore round the corner.

Getting the toddler to move, though, proved tricky. 'I won't.' Cue full-on tantrum. The small play park was just fine for him, and no amount of cajoling with the offer of better rides – including a train ride, his favourite – would work. He just stamped his feet and threw himself theatrically on the ground. Eventually, his dad just had to pick up the by-now-screaming toddler, rugby ball style, and carry him round the corner.

Suddenly a host of glittering lights and new sounds attracted his attention. He opened the eyes in his puffy, tear-streaked face and saw.... well, his eyes lit up, and 5 seconds later he was running full pelt ahead of the family towards the first of many electronic rides, joy and surprise written all over his young face.

We may laugh at the scene, and many of us will have had similar experiences with children. But sometimes we adults aren't so different, especially when it comes to the spiritual life. We begin by experiencing something, and we settle into a pattern which works for us, but little by little we lose a sense of expectation. What we have is enough – but we can't imagine that things could be different or better than they are. I want to stress that I'm not talking here about the very important gift of contentment with our circumstances, or the equally important encouragement that God's grace is always enough for us in every situation – but rather that *sense of expectation of what God might be able to do, in us or in others*.

Nathanael had received a word of divine knowledge, and he was very impressed by that – so impressed that he immediately worships Jesus as divine (v49). But Jesus is quick to let him know that he can expect a lot more than that – he will see 'greater things' (v50). Indeed, picking up the reference to Jacob we noted yesterday, he refers to Jacob's famous dream of open heaven, and heaven and earth connecting with each other, such that God's family goes global (v51).

It's a clear reference to what Jesus would achieve through his life and ministry on earth. But it also reminds us that *there's always more with God*. However long we've followed Jesus, we can all continue to pray for, and wait expectantly for, 'greater things' – God's kingdom growing, heaven touching earth in new ways, and God's presence continuing to draw us closer to Him.

Today, let's pray for contentment in our circumstances, and grace sufficient for this season – but let's also pray expectantly for greater things to be revealed to us and to others, flowing from God's inexhaustible riches.

Day 16 – John 2:1-11 (i) 'Not yet'

There are often three answers to a direct question: yes, no and not yet. It's a situation we've all had to get used to more often in the last few months. As so much of our lives has been put on hold or restricted, many of the things we used to do have been re-graded from a 'yes' to a 'not yet'. Some of you in particular will currently be facing the pain of a 'not yet': perhaps with what should have been a routine hospital appointment. Or a cancelled birthday party. Or a much longed-for trip away.

'Not yet' is often the hardest of all answers to accept. We like a 'yes'; we don't like a 'no', but at least it's a clear outcome. Not yet is effectively a 'yes, but... wait'. In other words, the issue is timing, not the request or activity itself.

The same is true of prayer. We know that God listens and loves to answer – but sometimes his answer is 'not yet' too. It tests our faith, and patience. When Jesus attends the wedding party at Cana he receives a direct request from his mother. His answer, too, is 'not yet'. Or as he puts it: 'My hour has not yet come' (v4). He was referring primarily to his revelation as God's Messiah, and what that would demand of him. But knowing that part of this revelation was to demonstrate signs of his authority, the effect is much the same. 'Am I to reveal my authority publicly?perhaps not yet.'

This is a famous story, and we know how it ends. Jesus *does* do something remarkable, which we'll explore a bit more over the next couple of days. But today I want us to dwell for a moment at this point of the story – *the 'not yet' moment*. It seems particularly appropriate for this season.

There may be things for each of us where we feel God's answer has been 'not yet', and this causes us discomfort – perhaps literally. Let's seize faith today to believe that *God keeps on listening*. Human plans may fail, but God has not forgotten us. Jesus encourages us to keep praying in faith. Not yet can become a yes, in God's good time.

The wedding at Cana reminds us that Jesus is the one who provides. Jesus is the One who can do things others can't. Take your 'not yet's' to him today and pray for more grace for the journey, and new hope.

Day 17 – John 2:1-11 (ii) 'Do whatever he tells you'

Over the last 10 or 15 years, Youtube has become a constant companion for many of our lives. Some of that is questionable – there's only so many videos you can watch of cats who look like Winston Churchill, or people falling over in comical fashion.

However, Youtube is also chock-full of fantastic 'how to' videos. If you want to learn a skill, for many of us Youtube has become the place to learn it. My son learnt how to play Pachelbel's Canon on the piano by watching Youtube. Alise makes all kinds of amazing crafts, having watched the 'how to' on Youtube. When I wanted to work out how we might go about livestreaming a service in church a couple of months ago, my first port of call was – you guessed it – Youtube. I found a fantastically helpful 15 minute video which told me exactly how to do it, step by step.

For all that we like to see ourselves as authors of our own destiny, most of the time for life to work we need to do what somebody tells us. The trick is to follow the right lead, the right set of instructions.

In the wedding at Cana, Mary gives us a profound insight into one of the deepest truths of all human existence. It might only be a party, and the problem might only be a shortage of wine, but her advice to the servants is one which all of humanity would do well to listen to: *'Do whatever Jesus tells you.'* If the key to life is following the right lead, the right instructions, then the Son of God is probably the obvious go-to place. Not even Youtube can beat that!

And yet, whilst it seems so simple in theory, in practice it can be challenging. We face so many voices, so many competing ideas – hearing Jesus' voice and then choosing to obey it can sometimes be unexpectedly hard. It's why we need to keep going back to the bible, to the gospels, to hear the authentic voice of Jesus speak. And the more we soak in those truths, the more we also get to make good judgements about things which aren't directly addressed in Scripture.

Perhaps today you face a decision. This passage gives us the best advice we could ever receive: do whatever Jesus tells you. And if that's not clear yet, take a few moments to pray for Jesus' wisdom and guidance. However big or small, it's his direction we need. And he has the power and authority to help you face the outcome. His water can be our fine wine. May his presence and peace guide you, that you might follow Mary's advice and see God's extraordinary activity in your life. Amen, thanks be to God.

Day 18 – John 2:1-11 (iii) 'The servants knew'

Most of us quietly like secrets, don't we? That sense of being privileged to some private info, getting the lowdown, the inside scoop. Whole movements are built on secret knowledge, and bizarre conspiracy theories on this kind of 'special secret'.

Generally, wise advice tends to counsel that we steer clear of secrets – and rightly so. They can be a source of power, control or bondage. 'There is nothing hidden that will not be made known,' as Jesus teaches his listeners.

But there is a sort of 'secret' which can be good. Jesus also refers to it: 'treasure hidden in field', is one way he described it, or more generally 'the secret of the kingdom of heaven'. This is shorthand for the idea that the work of God is often hidden from view to those not trying to look for it. Only those set on knowing and living the ways of God can see it.

This kind of 'secret' is often what gives us hope and encouragement in the dark times. People often question where God is, but we have more than just the testimony of Scripture and changed lives to strengthen us, powerful though those are. We also have the small answers to prayer; the word of encouragement when we most needed it; and maybe the occasional miracle which never made the headlines.

In today's story Jesus did an outstanding miracle – but it's equally clear that not everyone knew about it, even at the time. The master was fooled, as I imagine were most of the guests, many of them the worse for wear by that stage.... *...but 'the servants knew'* (v9). And who knows, maybe decades later they could still look back on that day and know that they witnessed the love and power of God in a remarkable way.

We too have those secret encouragements held in our hearts. Perhaps today, take a few moments to remember those special things which God has done for you or for others you know, which not many people know about – perhaps you alone. And give thanks that He is intimately involved in your unique and precious life. He knows – and you know too.

Day 19 – John 2:1-11 (iv) 'Saving the best till last'

Many of you who know me well will know that I enjoy cycling. It's been a particular treat for me over the last couple of weeks to see the Tour de France back on our TV screens. Normally this forms the backdrop to my July, but the COVID crisis led to it being postponed until September. One of the notable things about these long bike races is how a stage unfolds. It may be 150 or even 200km, and often relatively little happens for the first 90% of it (which is the bit I tend to skip). Then the riders come to the last big climb and suddenly, with 5km to go to the finish, the race explodes. Riders start attacking each other, trying to break away, and eventually the strongest makes it first over the line, gaining a few precious seconds in the overall standings.

It's not how you start, it's how you finish.

That's certainly true in cycling, but it's also true in the spiritual life. *Faith is the journey of a lifetime*, and ultimately it's about staying the course. We all love to see the enthusiasm of youth, and this energy should be celebrated in our churches. But it's even better to see that enthusiasm and energy develop into mature, experienced, enduring faith.

Gordon MacDonald, the great American pastor, who is now well into his 80s, still meets regularly with groups aged in their 40s and encourages them to expect that the second half of their lives will be more fruitful than the first. In a youth-obsessed culture, it's a healthy reminder that wisdom and experience matters, that a life walked faithfully before God will keep yielding fruit, that we can all finish well.

In the last of our reflections on this lovely story of the wedding at Cana, we focus on the astonished words of the master of the banquet, calling his servants together and praising them because they had saved the best wine till last. This was part of the joy of this miracle. It reminds us that God does not skimp on his blessings. It is also a clear pointer towards the later ministry of Jesus, whose 'last' saving act on the cross was the greatest of all.

But it also encourages us to remember that *our lives too can save the best till last*. That God's activity in our lives is not all downhill from a certain point, but can actually flourish and grow. That the deep wisdom of a life lived before God can bless others in remarkable ways, whatever our age.

Today, take a moment to give thanks for the ways God has been at work in your life, for the ways He remains at work – but let's also seize faith to believe that He can still be at work in you and through you, saving the best till now.

Day 20 – John 2:12-25 'The new temple'

Many years ago, I used to visit prisoners weekly in the local jail. The chapel where we met had an extraordinary picture, which I've never seen in quite the same way anywhere else. It showed Jesus stood on top of one of the moneylenders' tables, muscles taut, whip in hand, while people cowered around him. It was a very masculine image, far more imposing than the way Jesus is usually presented – and it struck me how important it was for the men in that place to see a Messiah they could respect.

The story of Jesus confronting the market stall holders and money-changers in the temple has often troubled people. Brought up on the idea of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', many struggle with this more confrontational Jesus. But perhaps the problem is more with our enthusiasm to emphasise one aspect of Jesus' character, and not his courage or his absolute determination to see the will of God done.

Jesus is always bigger than our view of him, there are always new things to discover. And St John reminds us today why the corruption of the temple so exasperated Jesus. It was the place where the Almighty God met with people in a unique way – and so, of all places, should be kept pure. Zeal for the glory of God consumed Jesus, as the text says (v17), and so he acted decisively. It was probably the act which was most influential in getting him killed, as he went beyond being a spiritual reformer to being a direct threat to civil power.

Similarly, Jesus takes the conversation well past corrupt religious practices. 'Destroy this temple,' he says, 'and I will rebuild it in 3 days' (v19). In other words, a revolution is coming. God will soon meet with humanity in a new way – through Jesus himself. The cross is the perfect meeting place of God's justice and mercy, his power and his love. Jesus' death wins our salvation, and also God's victory over death and evil. A new, eternal temple – a new meeting place between God and humanity – is 'built'.

Today, let's give thanks that, because of this great work of God in Christ, we too have free access to God's love and grace, we too can walk with him, we too can experience the presence of God with us, we too can meet with God directly through Jesus.

And may that same zeal, that same enthusiasm for God's glory fill our hearts, too.

Day 21 – John 2:12-25 (ii) 'His disciples recalled'

I wonder what your earliest childhood memory is? Mine is a bit scary – I was 2 years old and playing in a sand pit in the back garden, when one of my parents' friends zoomed right past on a motorbike. I was absolutely terrified!

Memories are funny things – but incredibly important too. In the days before photos and social media, or indeed before widespread access to paper, memories were all people had. And throughout the bible, we are frequently encouraged to *remember*. Remember who God is. Remember how much he loves you. Remember all the great things he's done.

God remembers, too – in fact there are more references in the psalms to God remembering than us! Perhaps we need to remember because we are made in the image of God.... but I digress.

You might say that *you are what you remember*. And in today's passage, we see the disciples remembering something that struck them as odd at the time, but proved later to be very important. Jesus had spoken of rebuilding the temple in 3 days, and at the time it just sounded like gobbledygook. But after he rose from the dead.... *'the disciples recalled what he had said.'*

Suddenly it made sense – and it grew their understanding of Jesus, perhaps even their worship of Jesus, even more. Memories matter.

Today, take some time to remember. Remember what God has done for you, how much he loves you, perhaps specific special memories you have of his presence in your life. Maybe recall a scripture or a famous word of Jesus that means a lot to you, just like it did to the disciples. What does it say to you today? And do that, giving thanks that God also remembers you!

Day 22 – John 2:12-25 (iii) 'He knows all people'

There's nothing like being known, is there? Whether it's a relationship, a club, a job – the idea that we are *known* matters. It brings security, confidence, joy and occasionally challenge, since our faults are known as well as our strengths!

Running as a golden thread through all the gospels is the million-dollar question: who is Jesus? Is he a rabbi, a prophet, a troublemaker, the Messiah, even divine? Everything he says and does is to make himself known. Not always overtly – the parables are often riddles which aren't obvious at first. But the miracles are much more direct: John calls them 'signs' (v23) – they point to a message about who Jesus was, and is.

What people began to know about Jesus led many to 'believe in his name' (v23). But then John says this strange thing: 'Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people' (v24). This is more unsettling – the implication is that Jesus knew what was in their hearts and it wasn't all good. Eventually he was proved right – many protestations of love and loyalty proved fickle. People misunderstood what sort of Messiah he was going to be.

Jesus too knows our hearts – and this can be challenging. There are times when what is in our hearts is not good, and we need to bring that before him. Maybe there is something today that we need help to change – take it to Jesus now...

But it is also an encouragement, because the big difference for us is that *Jesus has chosen to dwell here, with us, in our hearts*. The cross has made us clean, and Jesus' knowledge of us is bathed in love and grace. He knows us – and still loves us! He is *for* us, and wants us to become all that we can be.

There is nothing like being known. And may that truth bring us security, confidence and joy today.

Day 23 – John 3:1-8 'Meeting Jesus at night'

I wonder when you find it easiest to meet with God? Perhaps with other Christians – say at church on Sundays, or maybe as part of a group during the week. Perhaps first thing in the morning, if you're naturally an early riser. Perhaps it's last thing in the evening, as you get ready for bed and say your prayers.

Or maybe it's at night. The hours of darkness are often an ambiguous time for us. We may feel more anxious or stressed, as small problems seem to grow in the night hours. I'm sure we've all experienced that! And yet we can often feel a closeness to God, a desire to turn things to prayer, to feel his presence with us.

King David talks openly in one of his greatest psalms: 'I think of you through the watches of the night' (Psalm 63:6). Our walk with God is 24/7, day and night. Knowing that God is with us always is a great comfort. And the great comfort of our faith is that we can meet Jesus at any time.

In today's reading, Nicodemus visits Jesus at night (v2). For him that was for reasons of fear – he was a respectable, orthodox leader and was worried what people would think if he was seen meeting this troublesome rabbi. But it leads to one of the greatest of all human encounters with Jesus – and a lifechanging one, if Nicodemus' presence at the cross is anything to go by (John 19:39).

Jesus often meets with us at night. If you're struggling with sleep or with peace during the dark hours, let that thought be an encouragement to you. Invite him to be close to you, turn your fears and worries to him in prayer. And let his presence fill you with his peace.

Day 24 – John 3:1-8 (ii) 'Born again'

Being present for the birth of my children remains one of the great experiences of my life. To witness new life coming into the world is something incredibly special. To know that, nine months previously, this amazing human being was just a single egg invisible to the naked eye is nothing short of miraculous. And not only that, this tiny bundle of flesh has a unique personality and set of gifts. It's mind-boggling.

The phrase 'born again', which famously traces back to this passage, remains one of the foundational principles of faith. It has been damaged by misuse and corrupted by parodies, but at its heart it speaks of *something no less miraculous than original birth – that our souls are made new, re-created*. 'If anyone is in Christ – new creation!' St Paul echoes three decades after Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. (2 Cor 5:21)

The idea that our spiritual lives can be re-created seems too good to be true. Nicodemus was plainly confused – 'surely we can't re-enter our mother's womb'?! We too may reflect on the events that have scarred our souls: the hidden thoughts and prejudices that shame us, the good things we didn't do, the love that seems to run out so quickly – and wonder how such a fresh start could be possible.

But, as Jesus reminded his disciples elsewhere, what is impossible for human beings is possible for God – with God, all things are possible (Mark 10:27). *Jesus came to give us all the miracle of new birth*. A slate wiped clean, scarred souls healed, the abiding presence of God to revive our life's journey. We may not have the dramatic 'darkness to light' testimony that some have, but our new birth is no less true or real.

Jesus is in the re-recreation business. And what Jesus starts, Jesus finishes. That re-creation is something he offers to us day-by-day. You may have received new life in Christ many years ago; or it may have been recently – but today, thanks be to God, you are a new creation. Jesus dwells in you, and he is able to keep you, whatever the day may bring. And as Jesus does that, in you and through you, may you 'see the kingdom of God'. Amen.

Day 25 – John 3:1-8 (iii) 'Where the wind blows'

As life rolls into mid-September, we're moving towards the Autumnal Equinox – a season of unsettled weather, and often particularly notable for strong winds. The sight of a fresh westerly breeze blowing the golden autumnal leaves off the trees is one of the great joys of creation. It's not so good for our green bins, as over the next few weeks Alise and I will clear tens of thousands of leaves from our lawn. But the spectacle of swaying branches and showers of leaves is both wonderfully dramatic and thoroughly life affirming.

We need the wind. We don't often like it – whether for what it does to our hair or our leaf blowers – but for our trees to survive, those dead leaves need to be detached. And if we are brave (or lazy) enough to let the leaves mulch they will help fertilise the ground over winter. At its heart, the autumnal wind brings life.

Jesus talks about wind in much the same way. In trying to explain the activity of God's Spirit bringing new life, he uses this beautiful and challenging metaphor of wind. Just like the wind, God's Spirit blows in unpredictable ways. 'The wind blows where it pleases' (v8). You may not be able to see it – but you can always see its effects.

And its purpose is to bring life. It's no accident that Jesus uses this image when talking about the new life being offered by God through Christ. To be born 'of the Spirit' is to encounter new life – and the wind of the Spirit is both powerful and unpredictable.

This thought can be unsettling. It prompts us to ask: 'how do we know where God's wind is blowing?' And that's a very good question to ask – a question Jesus loves us to ask! A key part of the journey of the spiritual life is *developing the capacity to see what God is up to, and then to give our energies to that*. A great Christian leader, when asked in a seminar I attended about how he chooses to invest his time, wisely answered: 'I just try to bless what God is doing.' In other words, I try to discern where God is *already* at work, and fall in with that. You can't go far wrong.

And Jesus gives us a clue as to how to discern better what God is up to – *look for the effects*. The wind leaves ripples on the surface. Where are the ripples in your life? Or the lives of others around you – the sure sign that God is up to something? Pray for wisdom to see the ripples today. And give thanks that the wind of God's Spirit still blows in your life, and mine.

Day 26 – John 3:9-15 'Lifted up'

'Whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.' (Matthew 23:12) It's not often that proves true in life. Most advice nowadays tend to focus on how to promote ourselves – at work, on social media, wherever. Occasionally we get heart-warming examples when humility really does get exalted. The England footballer Marcus Rashford's openness this year about his own experience of childhood poverty – and campaigning for others in similar circumstances – has proved wonderfully effective, and improved the lives of over a million people. Every year, hundreds of unsung heroes are awarded Honours for a lifetime of unstinting service, largely done unnoticed and unrecognised.

In the kingdom of God, humility is exalted. And what Jesus teaches, Jesus himself models. Living as a practically homeless itinerant, with no money or resources – save the inexhaustible resources of the kingdom of God – Jesus consistently refuses power and prestige.

And the greatest sacrifice of all – his death on the cross – is, in human terms, the ultimate humiliation. Jesus is wrongfully accused, deserted by his friends and followers, and dies the death of a criminal and a cursed man (Deuteronomy 21:33).

But this is not how Jesus describes it. In today's passage, Jesus says this to Nicodemus: 'The Son of Man must be lifted up' (v14). Lifted up on a cross, *the ultimate act of humility also becoming the act of greatest glory and exaltation*. The snake he refers to was given to God's people in a time of judgement to save them from death – you can read the story in Numbers 21. Jesus is drawing a similar parallel. He has come, he implies, to save us from death. And to do that, he must be 'lifted up.'

It remains an incredible thing that Jesus' great act of humility becomes our salvation. In the world's eyes, it was disgrace – in God's eyes, it was glory, 'lifted up' for the healing of the world. Give thanks today that Jesus was lifted up for you, that you might live and be free. And pray for grace that you too might live in humility, that God might exalt that humility to bless others.

Day 27 – John 3:16-21 'Not to condemn'

We live in turbulent times. Covid, Brexit, climate change – these are all words which cause us to shudder, perhaps to fear. And the underlying thread of much of our public debate concerns the role of human selfishness. Of people putting their own interests first, at the expense of others.

It is a story as old as human society. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Cain says to God way back in the fourth chapter of the bible, and we have questioned the limit of our responsibility for others ever since. It's hard for any of us to accept short-term pain for long-term gain, personal sacrifice for community wellbeing.

And one thing we are rarely short of in our media-driven world are condemning voices. Vitriol makes good headlines. And don't get me wrong, it's right to challenge selfishness. But so often our vision is one-eyed. We see what others do, and not our own culpability. It is the human condition.

God sees it differently. God is the only being with perfect vision, and the only one with the moral authority to challenge all wrongdoing. He knows that all of us deserve condemnation; we've all played our part, however big or small. And yet... and yet – his heart is always to forgive, to show mercy. God seeks positive solutions. There may be blame, but God never leaves it there, never gives up on the possibilities of hope, of new life. 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him' (v17).

In this great statement, Jesus sets out God's fundamental orientation towards the world. His judgement is just, but his heart is always mercy. *His desire is to save, not to destroy.* And in Christ he offers us that hope, that future, that salvation. 'For God so loved the world....'

When you close this page, there will still be Covid, there will still be arguments over Brexit, there will still be fears for the planet's future. And there will be many condemning voices, each trying hard to shout louder than the other. But let us cling ever more firmly to the mercy of God. God is the God of hope, of forgiveness, of salvation. He is still healing the world, with all its faults. He is still healing *us*, with all our faults.

And may God grant us grace to be those who show mercy, as He has shown mercy to us.

Day 28 – John 3:16-21 (ii) 'Come into the light'

A few years ago, some friends and I were out walking in the woods and got lost. It was approaching winter and by 4.30pm it was dark. All of our phones had run out of charge, apart from mine, which had a pathetic tiny little torchlight, only offering a few feet of watery beam. For an hour or so, we picked our way slowly through the undergrowth, frequently stepping into muddy puddles and hoping that we were vaguely heading towards our accommodation.

Eventually we came to a road, which we thought it best to follow, even though we had no idea what road it was. And finally, twenty or so minutes later we rounded a bend and the drive to the house hove into view. We opened the front door, dirty and weary, but immensely happy to find ourselves bathed in light. It was only a bulb in the hallway, but after two hours of almost total darkness, it might have been the glory of heaven.

There's nothing like coming into the light, is there? After hours of darkness every night, the approaching dawn causes the birds to burst into song every day – first the robin, then the blackbird. We can't translate birdsong – I wish we could – but I like to imagine that what they're all singing is: 'The light is coming! The light is coming!'

And Jesus describes the experience of meeting God in the exact same way – it's like *coming into the light* (v21). Jesus himself is that light – as he declares in v19 – and coming to Jesus is like being bathed in his light.

It's not an entirely comfortable image, as Jesus also admits that not everyone wants to be bathed in this light (v20). Just as light attracts moths but repels cockroaches, so Jesus' light draws some, while others choose to hide from it. The reason is that such people prefer to retain the choice to keep doing evil things, even though in Christ such things can be forgiven and left in the past. But for those who want to live in the light of God's love, healing and blessing, the response can only be one of joyful and thankful coming into that light.

Take a moment to give thanks today that God's light has found you. Choose again to be bathed in that light. Declare that light over all parts of your life. And if there is any darkness 'attached' to you at present – ask for God's light to shine there too. All things can be healed in the precious name of Christ. Thanks be to God!

Day 29 – John 3:22-30 'Waiting and listening'

Many things have changed in the modern wedding, and perhaps not for the better. The expense, the planning time required (usually years not months), the highly orchestrated sequence of happenings. Sadly many weddings today feel less like a community celebration and more like a choreographed 'event', obscuring the true and profound meaning of these great occasions.

Ironically, one thing the current social restrictions have restored this year is the joy of a simple wedding. Many couples who have married this summer have experienced to their surprise a profound relief at the removal of crippling expectations, financial or otherwise. But I digress.

One thing that has definitely changed over recent years is the role of the ushers – the male friends of the bridegroom. At the risk of sounding like an old fogey (and nostalgia isn't what it used to be), 'in my day' the job of an usher was quite demanding. Before wedding planners, ushers were expected to manage the practical jobs on the day. I remember one of the weddings where I was an usher removing litter under the church bushes two hours before the wedding started, and carrying all the couples' presents back to the car after the reception had finished. Now, the role is largely seen as a ceremonial one. It's more rare than you might think for ushers even to show guests to their seats as the ceremony begins.

In today's passage, John the Baptist paints himself as an usher for Jesus, and in some ways restores the role to its former glory. Being a friend of the bridegroom is a special privilege, he insists, and above all the role requires 'waiting and listening' (v29). And when the bridegroom arrives (i.e. so that his voice is heard), his friends are 'full of joy'.

We too are friends of Jesus. And today, John gives us some very simple but profound advice. *Our job is to wait, and listen.* To listen for his voice, and when we hear it, to receive what he says with joy.

I love the fact that knowing Jesus is described in celebratory terms. Yes, it's challenging, and there are dark days when we swim against the tide. But it's also a path of joy, because we know that the groom is coming! We will be united with Jesus forever, and until that day comes, we wait and listen for his voice with joyful expectation.

Jesus still speaks. And may God grant us grace to hear his voice today. Take a few moments, to wait, and listen. What encouragements is he speaking to you?

Day 30 – John 3:31-36 'As one from the earth'

'If only God would come to this earth again, then I would believe!' You may have heard this (or something like it) from people you know, or perhaps from interviews you've read. I certainly have. It is one of the great objections to faith – how can we believe unless we see it for ourselves? In particular, it'd be great if God would come again and show everyone that He's absolutely real? If that were to happen, the argument goes, then more people would believe.

Or maybe not. Maybe God's own testimony about himself is the one thing people *won't* believe.... Now there's a thought.

Today's passage is a difficult part of John, and says a number of challenging things. The theme of witnesses and testimony is a big part of John's gospel – it's why he wrote (20:31), but throughout there are references to the things that 'testify' to the truth and reality of Jesus.

The strange thing about today's reading is that John the Baptist makes it clear that the one testimony about Jesus that people don't believe is the testimony of Jesus himself – or, as John puts it in v32: 'No-one accepts his (Jesus') testimony.' The reason seems to be that Jesus is 'of heaven' while we are 'of the earth'. So it turns out that John the Baptist is a more effective witness to the truth of the good news about Jesus because he 'belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth' (v31).

This might seem counter-intuitive, but time and again Jesus refers to being rejected personally. *He relies on others to testify about him.* In chapter 5 he presents several such witnesses, including John the Baptist, and we'll look at that in time. But today, let's reflect for a moment that Jesus doesn't just use human beings as 'second best options' when it comes to sharing faith. Rather, he relies on them; it turns out they are the best possible witnesses, because they are 'of the earth'. They get it, they speak the right language.

Which is a roundabout way of saying that *you are not God's plan B.* Or C, or D, or Z for that matter. God needs you! Your faith matters, your witness matters, because we humans are the best people to share the good news of God's love with others. We can make the love of God real, by our words and actions.

That's quite a thought, isn't it? It's both a privilege and a responsibility, and many of us feel nervous about the responsibility part of that. We'll come onto some good news in that regard tomorrow. But today, let's rejoice in the thought that God intends to do most of his great work on earth through us. *We matter.* Our faith matters. The little ways we can point to God matter. God is in them – and you (yes, you!) are His witness.

Take a moment to pray today that God would empower your witness, in whatever shape that takes, today.

Day 31 – John 3:31-36 (ii) 'Spirit without limit'

All you can eat buffet. Unlimited data. We're used to these kinds of promotions in our modern society – and they're always tempting. In most restaurants we order particular dishes, and to order others would cost extra – but an 'all you can eat' buffet offers food potentially without limit. Similarly our phone contracts often cap what we can use – but the promise of unlimited data offers download possibilities beyond our wildest dreams... sort of.

But what about the spiritual life? Is there a limit to what we can expect? A level of maturity beyond which we cannot go? A cordon surrounding access to God beyond which we cannot pass, rather like the tight security detail for a famous person? A cap on what God can give, rather like the ceiling in a monthly data contract?

In today's reading, John the Baptist's makes this stark comment: 'He gives the Spirit without limit' (v34). In other words, there is always more of God to receive, more of his love and power to discover.

There is some debate over how to read this phrase – does the 'he' refer to God the Father, whose spiritual anointing of the Son is without limit? Or does it refer to the Son (Jesus) whose capacity to give the Spirit to those who seek him is without limit? The NIV translation favours the first of those, but I'm not so sure. Since the context is the preceding phrase, which references the one who 'speaks the words of God' (i.e. Jesus), and the marriage of word and Spirit in the ministry of Jesus is referenced at least twice in the next three chapters (4:24, 6:63), I think the 'he' here is Jesus.

Why does this matter? Because, if correct, it means that *the 'Spirit without limit' is for us and not just for Jesus*. We have an unlimited data contract with God. It's not bound by time constraints (Sunday mornings?), prayer techniques or anything else. It is mediated through God's word, as John testifies, but as long as we're humbly soaking up as much of that as we can, then the promise is clear – Jesus is able to give the Spirit without limit.

What a promise to light up our day! Seize faith today and ask for more of God, who gives without limit. Invite His Spirit into situations where you or others need Him. And keep trusting that your spirit-filled life, as 'one from the earth' will speak to others today. All things are in Jesus' hands.

Day 32 – John 4:1-3 'Divine delegation'

The story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well in John chapter 4 is one of the most famous in the bible. Over the next few days we'll bask in its beauty, and be encouraged by all that this lovely encounter has to tell us. But today, let's begin with a tiny detail that I've never noticed before...

Jesus' impact is growing. John the Baptist is joyfully stepping aside – the 'friend of the bridegroom' – so that his cousin's ministry can flourish, and by the start of chapter 4, Jesus is now baptising more disciples than John (v1). But then the gospel writer drops a glorious little bombshell: 'although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples.' (v2)

I love this footnote! What it tells us is that, even early in Jesus' ministry, *he was happy to share his work with his friends and followers*. Jesus is no control freak, nor a micromanager who needs things 'done right'. At this stage, his disciples still have very little real clue as to who he was or what he came to do, as the other gospels make clear – but even with their inexperience and incomprehension Jesus trusts them to play a central role at the very heart of his work.

I find this very encouraging. What's true then is true now. If Jesus can trust *them*, then he can also trust *us*. He's not looking for disciples who 'have it all together', who never make mistakes, who sail serenely through life. He simply wants to empower those with a surrendered heart and a willing spirit. *People like you and me*.

We may not have the joy of literally baptising, but we can all share in Jesus' work. And we can do so, knowing that Jesus trusts us to do it, and is with us every step of the way. Over the last couple of days we have focused primarily on how God equips us to share our faith – but Jesus' work includes everything that he can put his name to: caring for those in need, acts of compassion, campaigning for justice, encouraging the downhearted. And Jesus lets us do this vital work on his behalf.

So take heart today – yes, we trust in Jesus. But Jesus also trusts in you. Give thanks for this amazing privilege. And pray for enthusiasm and grace to do his work today.

Day 33 – John 4:3-10 'Divine initiative'

One day late in the year 2000 I'd just been to a particularly inspiring talk in central London, given by the late, great Rev. John Stott. I was on the tube platform and remember turning it all through in my mind. I prayed a short prayer: 'Lord, I'm ready for something new. Please show me what it is.' Literally the next day, a friend of mine called me up and asked if I'd like to join a new team at church which was taking an Alpha course into the local prison.

The call changed my life. I spent the next two years visiting inmates every week, and the team was privileged to witness dozens of prisoners come to faith. Miracles were frequent, and my own faith was inspired and challenged in new ways.

It all came from a simple phone call. Someone took the initiative – or rather God took the initiative through someone! – to invite me, and life was never quite the same.

In today's reading, God in the form of Jesus took the initiative to invite someone, and her life changed forever too. The story of the woman at the well has so much to teach us, but let's begin at the beginning, which as somebody once observed, is a very good place to start. Jesus is tired and thirsty and sits down by a well. A woman comes along to draw water and Jesus asks the most simple – but also extraordinary – question: 'Will you give me a drink?'

The story of God's engagement with humans is ultimately always about *God taking the initiative*. God came to meet Adam in the garden. God came to rescue his people from slavery. God comes to the earth in Christ. And Jesus comes into this woman's ordinary life to meet her too. That's what God does.

God comes to meet us as well. He takes the initiative, knocks at the door. Yes, he loves us to seek Him. But let's take heart and never forget the fact that he seeks us first.

Even better, God doesn't just seek out the brightest and the best – the stars, the leaders, those born to high position. Quite the reverse. The woman in our story was shocked because Jesus, as a male Jew, just wasn't meant to speak to a Samaritan woman. But Jesus did it anyway. He loves to break down our human walls of prejudice. He just loves meeting people where they are.

So today, let Jesus meet you where you are. Sit awhile with him, and give thanks that he continues to seek you, even as you seek him.

Day 34 – John 4:3-14 'Living water'

On BBC Springwatch this year there was a segment which looked at what you can find in the water of an average garden pond. A sample was sent to a lab, and what they identified was literally millions of living organisms, from simple microbes and algae to tadpoles, pondskaters and all kinds of larvae. We like to think of water as the stuff of life, though not quite like that! Nevertheless the average body of water is absolutely full of it – abundant life.

Unfortunately this kind of living water would be very dangerous for us to drink! However, there is another kind of living water which we absolutely need. It quenches not so much our physical thirst but something much deeper...

Yesterday we saw that when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, he was already breaking all the rules of social convention to chat with her. So he certainly has her full attention. Now, in our reading today, he engages it further with a cryptic comment which moves the conversation from a simple one about water on a hot day to the deeper questions of life. What makes us really *live*?

Answer that question from a physical point of view and it's obvious. In a hot climate you couldn't last more than 3 days without water. However, what if our deepest need is *spiritual* water – water for the soul? Who could provide that?

'If you knew who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' (v10)

In one extraordinary answer Jesus takes the conversation to a level which reveals the most profound truths of existence. Our souls thirst, and each one of us cries out for spiritual water. Jesus knew this was true for the woman, but in fact it could have been anyone, which is why this conversation recorded in John 4 is so important. And what we learn is that *it's Jesus who satisfies that thirst*. So much so, that whoever drinks it 'will never thirst', but instead have a spring within them 'welling up to eternal life' (v14).

What Jesus says to the woman at the well is what he says to us today. Does your soul thirst? Here's the water which satisfies you eternally – Jesus is the water of life. Drink deeply, for this water never runs out.

Day 35 – John 4:15-26 'Anytime, anywhere'

Where do you find it easiest to meet with God? That's an interesting question, isn't it, and I suspect a sample of us reading today's reflection would give a range of answers: for some it would be a church building – perhaps a particular church building. For others it would be their favourite place at home, a chair where they pray and read their bibles. For others again it would be out in nature, inspired by the beauty of creation towards the glorious Creator it points to.

The fact that we even ask this question marks a revolution in human understanding. For most religious worldviews in most cultures throughout most of history, God can only be met in particular holy places. In today's reading, Jesus and the Samaritan woman both reference two of those places: for the Samaritans it was a mountain, for Jews the temple in Jerusalem. Indeed the latter was very much the place which the Lord God had decreed for his people, the place where he met with humanity, received their worship and cleansed them.

But something new was coming (v21) – a new time when access to God would not be limited to particular places or mediated through particular people or rituals. *The presence of God would be available to all humanity – anytime, anywhere.* Wow!

We're so used to this thought that we rarely step back for a moment to appreciate just how amazing, how extraordinary, how revolutionary, how liberating that is. To be able to meet with God anytime, anywhere... in your chair at home, in nature, in any one of millions of buildings, all across the world. Forgive this reference, it's not meant to sound flippant, I'm being totally serious when I say that I used to meet God in the toilet at work. When something difficult hit me and I needed to really pray, there was nowhere else to go where I could be alone. So I took a cubicle in the gents and just... prayed. And for a few minutes that place became holy ground as one stressed young(ish) man sought God. Anytime, anywhere.

Next time we'll go deeper into *how* it is that we can meet God anytime, anywhere – but today, wherever you are, give thanks that *right there, you can meet God*. He is with you, He is listening, He is reaching out His arms of love. And wherever you go today, you can meet God there too. Amen, thanks be to God!

Day 36 – John 4:15-26 (ii) 'Spirit and Truth'

Laurel and Hardy. Morecambe and Wise. The Two Ronnies. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Brian Clough and Peter Taylor. Redgrave and Pinsent. Bacon and eggs. Cheese and pickle. Quinoa and feta cheese.... (yes, really)

Some combinations were just made to go together, weren't they? Great on their own, together they're unbeatable. Yesterday we looked at one great combination: anytime, anywhere. What Jesus shared in this extraordinary encounter with the Samaritan woman was a revolution in our understanding of when and where we can meet with our Almighty Creator God. It is, for sure, amazing news. But the mechanism by which we can do this also matters. How is this possible?

The answer lies in v23, and in *another unbeatable combination: the Spirit and the Truth*. To gain intimate access to God anytime, anywhere rests on these two ingredients – that, as Jesus says, we worship God the Father 'in Spirit and in truth.' Why? Because *these two lie at the heart of God's very being*: 'God is spirit' (v24) and therefore when Jesus gives His Spirit to all who follow Him, this enables us to engage with God on His own terms, as spiritual beings.

Similarly, God's word, as St John tells us later, is also Truth (17:17). Everything God says is true, and God's truth has the power to set us free. So Truth likewise connects us with the very core of God's Being.

Spirit and Word (truth), Word and Spirit. The two pillars of the spiritual life. *Everything else flows from these two*: our prayer life, our community life, our day-to-day life – *everything*. All the practices of a lively faith ultimately have to rest on these solid foundations: God's Word and God's Spirit. And since Jesus sends the Spirit, and is called the 'Word of God' from the beginning of time (1:1), it all ultimately points back to Jesus, the 'super-foundation' – or as the book of Hebrews puts it, 'the author and perfecter of our faith.'

It reminds us of the immense importance of investing time in understanding God's Word, and the equally important task of asking the Spirit to empower us to live out God's Word. Which is what you're doing right now! And by God's grace, may He empower you to live in the extraordinary and dynamic power of Word and Spirit this day – all the time, everywhere.

Day 37 – John 4:27-38 'Could this be...?'

Those of you who know the Trendalls well will know that we love crime dramas. It's partly about the joy of a puzzle, and partly about justice and the value of every human life. The thing about these dramas is that it always comes down to evidence. What evidence is there for us to believe that so-and-so is guilty or innocent?

Evidence matters. In our current society it is increasingly taking centre stage, and not just in court. Depending on who's asking, it might be evidence of a real relationship, of a right to remain, of whether the virus is advancing or retreating. Sometimes the whole of our society feels like a sort of extended crime drama, where everything is assessed according to 'evidence'.

We may think that's a good thing, or we may feel a bit uneasy about it. Perhaps a bit of both! Nevertheless, evidence allows us to make good decisions and form solid convictions. And this is just as true in matters of faith. What is it that allows us to stand strong in our faith, even when it's being shaken? *What is our 'evidence' that we rely on when our faith is tested?*

As the Samaritan woman leaves her life-changing encounter with Jesus, she returns to the community with all kinds of big questions buzzing around in her head. But those questions come to rest on one very powerful piece of evidence. She had just met someone 'who told me everything I've ever done' (v29). She had experienced what it was like *to be divinely known and loved*, and this knowledge provided convincing proof that he really was the Messiah he claimed to be. She couldn't wait to tell everyone! 'Could this be....?'

Her experience acts as an encouragement and reminder to us, too. We too have our 'evidence' of what it has meant to us to encounter God. Times when we have sensed God's presence, or received answers to prayer, times when we read Scripture and knew its truth deep inside us, or maybe even heard God's voice directly in some way. Above all, we seize by faith the same experiential truth which changed the Samaritan woman's life: that we are known and loved by God.

That was true yesterday, it's true tomorrow – and it is also true today. Jesus comes to meet you. You are known and loved by him. Could this be... a moment to reach out to him again in faith and joy?

Day 38 – John 4:27-38 (ii) 'Spiritual food'

I love food. I won't pretend otherwise. And all food, really. I can derive as much pleasure from cheese and beans on toast as from an expensive meal or an exquisite dessert. Not that I'll refuse the latter if you ever host me for a meal, I hasten to add.

Food is a joy. Food is also *fuel*. We need to eat to have the energy required for the rest of life. In our passage today, Jesus was hungry and thirsty and the disciples try to get him to re-fuel his body: 'Rabbi, eat something' (v31). But Jesus replies cryptically: 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about' (v32).

What was this 'food'? Clearly not physical food – let's abandon the thought that Jesus might have been hiding a pitta under his tunic, or some olives in his belt. This is clearly some sort of spiritual food. Many commentators have concluded that this is a reference to the spiritual nourishment (and discipline) of fasting, and there is much merit in that conclusion. Fasting really is a form of spiritual food, and if you've never tried it (and it's safe for you to do so) I would recommend giving it a go. You'll be surprised how alive you feel, and how close to God, if it's dedicated to him.

But although I agree with this line of thought, Jesus does give us a much more direct answer in the text itself: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me' (v34). *Obedience is energising*. It fuelled Jesus' life, even when he was physically hungry.

The same is true for us too. How are we nourished spiritually? Fundamentally by obeying God. As we do God's will (in whatever form that takes) so we are 'fed', we are energised in our journey of faith. It becomes the fuel of our spiritual lives – even if others know nothing about it.

As you reflect, what is God calling you to do today? Dedicate it to him, cover it in prayer – and may that obedience be, not just fuel, but the choicest of spiritual food for you this day.

Day 39 – John 4:34-42 'Open your eyes'

I don't know if you remember that craze about twenty years ago for pictures that had hidden objects in them. If you looked closely, after a few seconds another image would 'appear' within the picture. Apparently about 92% of the population was able to do them – I must confess I never could. I would look, and look – but not see.....

There is *a great difference between looking and seeing*. When we lose something at home, we might look and look and eventually we will *see* the item we're looking for. Or we can think about a problem, looking and looking over the evidence until finally we *see* the pattern or the answer.

How do we look at the world currently? Or perhaps, more importantly, what do we *see*? In today's passage Jesus teaches his disciples about the difference between looking and seeing. The disciples are confused: by Jesus stopping in Samaria; by his conversation with someone he was not culturally meant to associate with; by Jesus referring cryptically to different types of hunger. They were looking at Jesus and at the situation: but they couldn't *see* what Jesus was up to. And Jesus counsels them: 'Open your eyes!'

Jesus then seems to head off on a tangent about harvest mottoes, quoting two of them (v35, v37). But again, this is really all about the difference between looking and seeing. The disciples saw cultural chaos, but Jesus sees what God is up to. The harvest Jesus is talking about is the growing presence of the kingdom of God, of a great hunger to know God and be restored into relationship with Him. Even Samaritans – hated enemies of the Jews, and out of favour for 500 years – are seeking God, seeking truth, seeking spiritual nourishment. This, Jesus says, is the start of a new and bigger spiritual harvest, as God's presence and kingdom breaks out in a new way across the nation and the world. Open your eyes! Can you see it?

Even today, in our unsettled season, *we too can see a great awakening of spiritual hunger*. As so many of our anchors become unmoored, people are seeking assurance, peace, solid truths and foundations on which to find hope. And we know just where they can find it! Just as the Samaritan woman commends Jesus as 'the man who told me everything' (v29, v39), so we too can point others in the same direction. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And so may God grant us grace to open our eyes and see Jesus today. And may God open the eyes of all those who seek Him, especially those we know and love. May we too be privileged to hear others say: 'now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world' (v42). Amen.

Day 40 – John 4:43-54 'No honour in his own country'

Recently I was walking along our upstairs landing at home and passed a large picture on the wall. It's a collage of all our wedding cards, and it's been hanging in our house – wherever we've lived, six different dwellings during our married life – continuously for the last 21 years.

It struck me that I hadn't looked at it, even noticed it, for months. I pass it several times a day but I'm so used to it, it's just... there. Sometimes we get so familiar with things we stop noticing them, or enjoying them, perhaps we start to neglect them.

As the old saying goes: 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' I sometimes think that's a bit strong in most cases, but it's a healthy reminder that we can take things for granted, lose the wonder of something or someone. Jesus grew up in Nazareth in the region of Galilee – in a tight-knit and relatively small community he would have been well known as a child, then as a teenager and a young adult. 'Little Jesus with the grubby knees,' you might imagine his elderly neighbours saying as they looked at the mature adult returning and standing before them – just as perhaps you might have experienced when you've returned to the place where you grew up.

It must have been a shock to see the carpenter's son returning as a celebrated religious leader. They were used to him just being... ordinary. And that is what lies behind this puzzling phrase in v44 of today's passage: 'A prophet has no honour in his own country.' It means that people are too familiar with the person in question, they somehow can't see that over the years this person has become something *more*.

And so Jesus struggles to find any sort of authority or acceptance in the place where he grew up. We know from the other gospels that after he was rejected in Nazareth he went to live in Capernaum a little way away, and never returned. Here in John, Jesus moves on quickly to Cana, and we'll see what he does there tomorrow.

But there's a challenge for us too, isn't there. If we've walked with Jesus for a while, it's easy to get a bit too familiar, to lose the sense of wonder of who He is and all that He's done. The wonderful news of our faith is that *there's always more with Jesus*: more to learn, more to discover, more to experience.

Today, if you feel a bit jaded – and maybe even if you don't – pray for God to give you a fresh sense of wonder at the good news of Jesus, of His love, goodness, power and glory. May we have grace to give Jesus the honour that He deserves, and in doing so, find our hearts captured anew.

Day 41 – John 4:43-54 (ii) 'Your son will live'

One of our favourite TV series of recent years has been 'Unforgotten'. It's a crime drama which solves old cases, sometimes 30 or 40 years after the event. The interplay of the characters is particularly good, but the central idea is what makes the drama compelling – the idea that, even many years later, the person who died *matters*, they are not forgotten.

We often hear media stories about 'the forgotten heroes of such-and-such', and today has been a useful memory jogger for me. I had forgotten that there are *two* miracles which take place at Cana in Galilee. By far the most famous is the wedding party (which we looked at in detail a few weeks ago), where Jesus turns water into wine. If you know much about the story of Jesus, or even a little, you'll probably have heard of that one. Probably a significant percentage of people who rarely set foot in a church building would be able to identify that as one of Jesus' miracles.

But there is second miracle which John records, whose location is almost entirely forgotten – in fact, it's the next miracle in the gospel and we discover it here in today's passage. After his visit to Jerusalem and back through Samaria, Jesus returns to Cana (v46), and miraculously heals an official's son. It turns out that the son was in Capernaum, but Jesus' power and spiritual authority is such that he can perform the miracle at some miles' distance, healing the child by a simple word.

It's an unsettling story, in a number of ways – that Jesus doesn't journey with the man, but heals at a distance (one of the very few occasions this happens, though not the only one); that he is somewhat stern and terse with the official, despite the official's mixture of faith and desperation. But at its heart is this glorious declaration: '*Your son will live.*' (v50)

As many of you know, this phrase is very close to my heart at present, since my own son had emergency lifesaving surgery 4 weeks ago, and, with all thanks to God and also to our local hospital, he did live, and is recovering well. We know what it's like to pray to God in hope and desperation, and to see our son live.

But it also takes me back to the heart of the gospel. What is our good news? Ultimately it is about life. *God's plan and purpose for us is life* – abundant, eternal life. Wholeness in every dimension, life in all its fullness. What Jesus offers the official here is a wonderful demonstration of that – but it points to the bigger truth, and one that we can give thanks for today.

May God fill our hearts again with joy and thanksgiving at the life that He offers – and may we too both pray for and experience that life in our hearts, minds and lives today. Because of Christ, we too can live.

Day 42 – John 4:43-54 (iii) 'Taking Jesus at his word'

This weekend the world's news has been dominated by President Trump's positive test for COVID-19. As every update is pored over, there has been huge debate in the media over conflicting reports. When did he test positive – some reports suggested on Wednesday, others later in the week? On Saturday, his medical team said he was doing 'great', then shortly after his close adviser said the next 48 hours would be critical. As so often seems to be the case in our current society, one question keeps coming back: *whose word do you trust?*

If you're anything like me, most of the time our response is, increasingly, to throw up our hands and say: 'frankly, I don't trust any of them'. We live in an age marred by chronic 'truth decay'. Truth is no longer treasured as the noble pursuit of an objective reality; rather, like a good credit card, it's our 'flexible friend.' 21st century 'Truth' seems determined by whichever opinion consistently shouts the loudest to the most people – ideally saying the thing that this group of people secretly wants to hear.

How refreshing it is, then, to come back to this story in John and drink deep of this simple, but deeply profound phrase: 'The man took Jesus at his word.' (v50) If only it were always that simple! To hear something and trust its author so implicitly that the word is enough. We can simply receive it, and go on our way, safe in the knowledge that whatever was spoken was true, and real.

But, sometimes it really *is* that simple. *It all depends on who says it.* One of the great joys of our faith is that we can listen to Someone who is completely trustworthy. Who isn't tainted by corrupt money or secret prejudice. Whose purpose is life, and not to 'steal or kill or destroy' (John 10:10). Who gives continually of Himself for our wholeness and flourishing.

When I find the torrent of lies and manipulation overwhelming, it is pure joy to come back to this beautiful book – the Bible – and there find truth. *Something I can trust implicitly, because the Someone who spoke it loves me and gave His life for me* – in other words, Someone who I can likewise trust in the very depths of my being.

Much of the time, the key to spiritual life is disturbingly simple: it is to take Jesus at his word. I say disturbingly because we humans rather enjoy complicating things. Surely there's a catch?!

The royal official faced a similar dilemma. He wanted Jesus to come with him. But in the end, he overcame his internal dialogue and took a step of faith: he trusted Jesus. And his mustard seed of faith was wonderfully rewarded.

Today, may we too experience the deep joy of taking Jesus at his word. Which of his many beautiful words will you cling on to today? Let it sink deep, and may it likewise stir our hearts to faith, and trust.

Day 43 – John 5:1-6 'Do you want...?'

I have an annoying blocked nose at present. Don't worry, it's not COVID – the doctor has diagnosed it as 'Post Nasal Drip' (a bizarre name to my way of thinking: I do still have a nose, so I'm certainly not post-nasal...). Anyway, I have a little spray thing to squirt up my nose every day for the next few weeks, or maybe longer. The joy.

Let me make a confession here – I'm not very good at taking medicine. I often forget, and in this case, I find the sensation fairly unpleasant, so I suspect my 'forgetting' could easily be re-phrased as 'I often don't want to.' I've been taking it – or failing to take it – for about 3 weeks, and it's not doing much, really. Apart from sitting on my table, looking at me and making me feel guilty.

But it does beg the question: do I want to get well? Is it worth enough to me to keep taking an unpleasant medicine every day for weeks or even months? Is my life hampered sufficiently by a slightly drippy nose to observe the discipline of medication every day?

My little problem is minor, and has very little effect on the quality of my life, save that I need to clear my throat a few times a day. It pales into insignificance compared to the very serious disability that the chap in our passage suffered from. Whatever form his disability took, it left him unable to work, and carrying the double stigma of being thought to have inherited or contracted this disability because of family sinfulness (we'll get to that bit in a couple of days). For 38 years he had lain by the healing pool quite palpably not being healed.

You would think he would give anything for healing! And yet Jesus asks: 'Do you want to get well?' (v6) It seems the most odd question, doesn't it? Of course he does! ...or does he?

We desire many things for our lives. In quiet moments we may wish our lives to change in many ways. But if we're honest, *we also carry a hidden fear of what those changes might mean.* We've lived a certain way for so long, it's hard to imagine that life could be different. What if it's worse? What if I've longed for something for so long and then it's a disappointment? What if I end up wishing I hadn't gone for this, or asked for that, or tried the other instead? What if, in making this change, I somehow lose a part of my identity?

So maybe it's not such a daft question Jesus asks after all. And maybe for some of us, we too have similar deep needs and desires which bring us conflicting emotions. Whatever our current situation, we still fear change. We want something, and we don't want it. How can we *know*?

The answer is that you can't – but you *can* know the Person you're asking. I'll leave today's final word to Minnie Haskins: 'I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."'

Day 44 – John 5:1-11 'The law forbids...'

We are fortunate to live in a relatively law-abiding country. Which is just as well, because there are a lot of them to follow. In 2010, the UK passed 3,506 new laws – and just in case you wondered if this is particularly driven by one political persuasion or another, the outgoing Labour government was responsible for 1,788 of them, and the incoming Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition for 1,718. So they're as bad – or as good! – as each other.

Admittedly 2010 was a record year for laws, but if you imagine totting up everything we've legislated since Magna Carta in 1215, it's going to be big number. As an aside, the oldest law which is still in force dates back to 1267, which essentially stopped Lords from recovering debts by foul means, requiring them to use the due process of law.

The Jewish law given by God and recorded in the first books of the bible, totalled 613 separate commands (which rather pales in comparison, doesn't it?). It was a comprehensive vision of life, but also left many areas for interpretation. Over the centuries, these 613 commands were massively extended by *human interpretations of God's law*. For example, the very sensible Sabbath laws which forbade work on God's Holy Day (Saturday), were intended (a) to allow everyone to enjoy the benefits of rest; (b) to reinforce the equality of all people, since servants enjoyed the same time off as everyone else; (c) to break the stranglehold of the acquisition of wealth on people's lives and (d) to give people time to worship God properly. All good, really.

Somehow over the years these very healthy commands got distorted into obsessive discussions about what constituted 'work'. Eventually all tasks were more or less banned on the Sabbath, even very sensible ones like – in today's passage – people being able to carry their mat to wherever they needed it (particularly important if you had a disability). Hence the Pharisees objection to the healed man: 'The law forbids you...' (v10)

There's a salutary lesson here. We need laws – they set boundaries, and when applied fairly, allow people to live constructively in community. However, even good laws ultimately rest on systems of compliance and punishment. To enforce them is essentially a negative vision of living. Do this – or else!

In this story, Jesus applies the spirit of the law – indeed the correct vision of this particular law – and acts according to grace. *Grace is driven by love, not fear*. Grace prioritises the person not the rule. Grace heals rather than punishes. It's still the heart of our faith – and speaking personally, it's still the best word I ever heard!

I'm not saying that laws should be disobeyed, or that we don't need them. But we should always remember that *laws can only take us so far*. Jesus calls us – like the healed man – towards his grace, which transcends our structures and our systems. Today, let's rejoice that, thanks to Jesus, 'we are no longer under law, but under grace.' (Romans 6:14) And let's be those who share that grace lavishly with others.

Day 45 – John 5:7-13 'He had slipped away'

I wonder if you've ever experienced the kindness of a stranger? It's an unusual sensation – this person appears just at your moment of need... and then disappears just as quickly. If that's ever happened to you, then you'll know what the man in our story feels like. Jesus has just changed his life forever, healing a chronic physical condition (v8-9). But as the man tries to explain himself to others, he realises that the person who has done this is nowhere to be found. As the text says, the man 'had no idea who he was, for Jesus had slipped away...' (v13).

The story of Jesus is a story of humility. Born in a shed for animals, surrounded by the scandalous whiff of a teenage pregnancy. Forced to live as a refugee in childhood, and then choosing to live in ordinary obscurity for his early adult years. He never wrote a book, or travelled outside of his country as an adult. He consistently refused power and privilege, and preferred the company of those on the margins of society. He lived effectively as a homeless wanderer (Matthew 8:20), and died a wrongful death, an innocent man executed like a criminal.

Not surprising, perhaps, that this kind of man would choose to practice kindness anonymously. He had done God's work, and left the rest to his Father.

It is the path he too calls us to follow. He encourages all who would follow him likewise to practise their acts of kindness in humility, not taking attention for ourselves, but seeking our satisfaction solely from God (Matthew 6:1-4). And much of the time, his followers have taken him at his word. Even today, recent research has indicated that a Christian in the UK is 3 ½ times more likely to be involved in voluntary work as those who do not profess a faith. That work is largely unrecognised and unrewarded. Just millions of faithful followers quietly doing their master's bidding. Just as Jesus intended.

It can be hard to resist the temptation for plaudits and praise. There is a bit of us that wants to be noticed for the good that we do. And every so often, if you do receive a compliment or a thank you, treasure it. There's nothing wrong with receiving and enjoying unsought thanks. But today, let's be inspired again by Jesus' humility, let's give thanks for his example, and let's pray for grace to do our small acts of kindness today in the same spirit, knowing that our great God smiles down on us as we do.

Day 46 – John 5:1-15 'Our deepest need'

What is your deepest need? It's a good question to ask, isn't it? I suspect there would be a lot of different answers to that question. Some would say health, others happiness, and yet others love and relationship. For many of us at the moment it would be hard not to think about an end to viruses and lockdowns!

This unusual story of the healing at the pool is really *all about our deepest need*. Today we'll read the story one last time (before we get to Jesus' debate with the Pharisees) and draw some threads together. In particular I want to tackle the most difficult part of it head on – verse 14. What on earth does Jesus mean when he says: 'Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you'?

Jesus is always full of surprises – whenever we try to put him in a box, he seems to defy the limitations we put on him. Already we've seen him ask what appears to be an obvious question (v6) and then mystifyingly slip away into the crowd (v13). Nevertheless, verse 14 is one of the most controversial in the gospels. Was Jesus really endorsing the prevailing view of the culture that the man's disability was caused by some sin he (or his ancestors) had committed? And that therefore unless he changed his pattern of life he would suffer a similar fate again?

This is largely the view taken by scholars, who argue that Jesus was still very much 'of his culture' and was unwilling at this stage to publicly contradict it. However, that seems unlikely: partly because Jesus didn't seem shy of challenging cultural norms at the temple in ch2 or by the well in ch4; and, more tellingly, he himself refused to endorse this viewpoint in a similar episode at the beginning of chapter 9:

'As Jesus went along he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."' (9:1-3)

It's hard to imagine Jesus contradicting himself so obviously, so it must mean something else...

Which brings us back to our deepest need. In the end, the story of Scripture and of humanity is that *our deepest need is to be reconciled to God*, or in language of John, to know God's true and abundant *life* within us. The man had been healed physically, but Jesus here is pointing to his deeper need to be made whole spiritually as well. The 'something worse' is a life still not reconciled fully to God.

In a way, this story is the equivalent of the famous story of the paralysed man, who was lowered through the roof and healed both spiritually and physically. It reminds us that *God's plan for us is glorious wholeness in every dimension, every facet of our being*.

We may not have experienced something as dramatic as the healing by the pool but we too are recipients of God's abundant life. Today, let's give thanks for that wonderful gift, and pray that we might dwell in that life ever more fully. If there are things that bind us, may those too be brought to our great God in prayer, that we might live in greater freedom and wholeness.

Day 47 – John 5:16-19 'Always at his work'

Where is God when....? I'm sure that's a question you've heard numerous times. Perhaps you've asked it yourself. Something bad or unexpected happens. Something we wish *hadn't*. Something that causes us pain. And we wonder: where is God? Is He silent? Why didn't He intervene?

It's natural to ask those questions. God's people have always done so. The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was once asked to describe the psalms, and he replied that he liked to picture the psalms as 'a little old Jewish man, shaking his fist against God.'

The fact that we can shake our fists is instructive in itself. God is not a capricious tyrant who cannot tolerate being questioned. That tells us something very important about who God is, and what God is like. He can take it – he can absorb our pain within himself.

It's also important to understand that God never takes a holiday. If bad things happen, it's not because God has taken His eye off the ball, or had a break. God instituted the Sabbath for our benefit, but as Jesus says in today's passage, God is 'always at his work' (v17). God's care for us never stops. God's desire for His kingdom to come in this troubled world is continuous, too.

But God doesn't force himself on situations, or us. He may be constantly attentive to our world, but not at the expense of our freedom to choose. There is a mystery why certain miracles happen, and others do not. At the pool, the man was wonderfully and spontaneously healed – and Jesus reminds his persecutors that doing good is not stopped by the Sabbath. God is always doing good.

For all that, we may have unanswered questions, or unhealed wounds. Perhaps today, we can give those questions and those scars back to God. Invite him to be at work in them. And may that simple thought that God is still working today, in your life and in the world, bring you a measure of comfort and peace. God's love and care for you never ceases. He is always at His work.

Day 48 – John 5:19-23 'Follow the leader'

I wonder if reading the words 'follow the leader' immediately conjured up visions of the classic playground game. Perhaps you were momentarily transported back... The idea of the game was very simple – it did exactly what it said on the tin: someone was appointed the 'leader' and everyone had to copy whatever the leader did. If you didn't, you were out!

In today's passage we see a divine version of 'follow the leader'. Having healed the man at the pool, Jesus is now in debate with the Pharisees, who are hot under the collar because Jesus had appeared to break Sabbath laws – although in fact he hadn't, he'd only challenged their *interpretation* of the law by healing on the Sabbath. In reply, Jesus has already told them that he was doing God's work (v17) – in other words, they'd misunderstood the spirit of God's law, which was never meant to stop people doing good, even on the Sabbath.

However, in these verses he goes a step further. This work, he says, is not just commended by God – *it is God's very work, conducted on behalf of God Himself*. Here we see for the first time Jesus declaring his relationship to God publicly. He has already said it privately to Nicodemus (3:16), but this is very different. He is in the capital city, Jerusalem, surrounded by the great and the good. And he scandalises them because he refers to God as his Father (v17, v19), and to himself as the Son. This immediately puts his own life at risk (v18) – but he hasn't finished yet...

In this beautiful personal testimony of Jesus' relationship to his Father, he admits that his whole *raison d'être* is to do what God does (v19). Indeed, he *only* does what God does. It is 'follow the leader' on a divine scale. This includes great works (v20) and the very gift of life itself (v21).

We are now the body of Christ – his hands and feet, eyes and mouth in the world. So it follows that if Jesus' calling was to do the things God does, so *we too are to bless what God is doing*. We are not God – but we carry God's presence and His call to do what He would do. To care for others, to serve the poor and vulnerable, to bless the world, to be bringers of life, carrying the presence of Christ wherever we are.

In this season we may not be able to do all that we would like. But let us take heart nonetheless that we still have that call – to do what Jesus does in this precious world, because Jesus does what his Father does. And may God bless that call in our lives, this day and this week.

Day 49 – John 5:24-30 'Crossing over'

I love bridges. They've always had a fascination for me – something about the design, something about the view as you go over one, perhaps even a cheeky sense of 'cheating' nature by traversing something that should be impassable.

It's hard to pick a favourite bridge, but Clifton Suspension Bridge in my old home of Bristol would have to be right up there – the view is remarkable, and the feat of engineering to achieve it barely less so. Near the top would also be the Hornsey Lane road bridge over Archway Road, which I walked across most weeks as a child to get to the local park. Watching four lanes of traffic zoom past either to or from Highgate was thrilling as a 5-year-old – and quite exciting even now!

Ultimately the purpose of a bridge is to enable us to cross over. And in today's passage, Jesus describes another 'crossing over', this time a fundamental one: from death to life. The thread of John's gospel is governed by two deep contrasts: darkness and light, and death and life. And in each case, Jesus comes to bring us the latter. He is the light which shines in the darkness, a light we step into (3:21). And, as he shares here, *he is also the path from death to life*. 'Whoever hears my word and believes.... has crossed over from death to life' (v24).

It's a stunning claim, perhaps dimmed by our familiarity with it. But it has the power to shock nonetheless: the journey of following Jesus is ultimately a path from death to life. It is the great 'crossing over' we all make, if we believe in Jesus and in his good news.

Take a moment to reflect on this great truth. What was that bridge like for you? Perhaps the crossing was simple: you heard and believed and made the journey right away. Perhaps it was more like the Clifton Suspension bridge: long, unlikely and quite scary. Perhaps the winds buffeted – or maybe they still do. But whatever the bridge was like, ultimately what matters is that *you crossed it*. And in doing so, you received Jesus' great gift to us: life.

However long ago you crossed that bridge, today let's rejoice that we crossed over – and may that thought give us hope to keep journeying along the road. It is still the path to life.

Day 50 – John 5:24-30 (ii) 'Life in himself'

Last week I showed our young people's group a fascinating video about space. We marvelled at the sheer size and scale of it. As pictures of galaxies and supernovas danced across the screen, I could hear the gasps of amazement even through my mediocre Zoom camera. As we got to the Big Bang, I put the idea to them that the Big Bang was science's way of describing how God first began to create the universe. And it's been expanding ever since.

There are lots of things we learn from marvelling at creation. Certainly we can gasp in awe at the extraordinary power which fuelled the universe, which speaks of God's majesty. We can also note how *God can't help bringing life*. Most of the universe is inert matter, but God has 'life within himself' (v26) – this God at some point has to fill what He creates with *life*. And so we have our beautiful earth, bursting with life.

This idea of God having life within himself matters because it helps to explain how we too can enjoy eternal, abundant life. Life is not just a 'construct' or a mechanism, like winding up a clock. God possesses it innately, and it follows that anything he touches possesses it too. So when Jesus comes to earth, he carries that life within himself (v26). And as Jesus' followers are brought into his family and receive his Spirit, *that life is imparted to us too*. So 'those (of us) who hear will live' (v25). Not just now, but eternally. Life imparts life imparts life.

In a season marked by increasing darkness and worry, locating and dwelling in the source of irrepressible life seems to matter even more. Jesus is that source! Today, let's give thanks for that life – and let's breathe deeply of it. For just as Jesus imparts it to us, so we too can be bearers of that irrepressible life to others – pleasing the one who sends us (v30).

Life imparts life.

Day 51 – John 5:31-40 'The witnesses'

I wonder if any of you have ever appeared as a witness, say at a trial or in a legal dispute. I never have, though I had a close call once about 20 years ago. I got as far as the waiting room only to discover that the barristers had accepted my written testimony and didn't need me to appear in person. I must confess to being absolutely terrified, in fact I was so nervous that morning I had forgotten to put a belt on when dressing, forcing me to keep my hands in my pockets on the journey there to stop my trousers slipping down!

Sadly, our legal system needs witnesses because it is presumed that the defendants or plaintiffs are probably not telling the truth, and therefore independent corroboration is needed. Even Jesus, the only perfect human being who ever lived, understood this principle: he knows that what he says about himself is not going to be treated as proof (v31). So in today's passage, as he continues his debate with the religious leaders, he points to several other witnesses which *demonstrate the truth of who he is (the Son) and what he has come to do (bring life)*.

First there is his cousin John, who we call The Baptist, whom Jesus describes beautifully as 'a lamp that burned and gave light' (v35). Then there are the miracles – these are 'weightier' (v36) because they are manifestly things that only God can do. Next the Father himself is named – and here Jesus is probably referring to the voice at his baptism, and where the Spirit descended like a dove (1:33).

Finally there are the Scriptures, which, Jesus says, 'testify about me' (v39). This is perhaps the boldest claim of all. All of his opponents considered scripture to be the very Word of God. And this Word points to Jesus!

Today, all believers have the great joy of seeing the whole of Scripture studded with references to the coming Messiah. Right from God's promise of a rescuer to crush the serpent's head in Genesis 3:15, the Word testifies that someone is coming – someone special, God's anointed. Greater than Moses, greater than David, promised by the prophets, prayed for by God's people.

Why not take a moment to dip into one of those great promises: say Isaiah 9, or 11, or 53. Give thanks that Jesus is the real deal – *the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams not just of a nation but of the world*. These are the witnesses – a sure and solid foundation on which to build our faith.

And may that foundation inspire us to be witnesses too, when opportunity arises. For He is indeed the one in whom we have life (v40).

Day 52 – John 5:41-47 'Seeking glory'

Glory. It's one of those words that everybody knows – and probably assumes they know what it is – but is very hard to define. It's also a word that has appeared a couple of times in John already, and forms a major theme of the book: 'we have seen his glory' begins John in 1:14. When Jesus turns water into wine, 'he thus revealed his glory' (2:11). Today's passage is also all about glory.

But what is 'glory'?

The Hebrew word in the Old Testament is '*kabod*' and it literally means 'weight'. So when the glory of God appears it is experienced almost like a weight pressing down – no wonder people fell to the ground! This idea of 'weight' became shorthand for *God's manifest presence in a situation*, and by extension it then came to mean anything that exalted God. So God's glory was anything that pointed to and honoured God.

In its true and original meaning, *glory is really God's alone*. However, once the word became shorthand for the practice of honouring or exalting someone or something, then it could transfer to others as well. And of course this is how we use it today. At the weekend you may have read of 'glory for Rafael Nadal in Paris', or as Strictly starts again, you may be thinking of which celebrity will 'dance to glory' in December.

In our passage today, Jesus challenges his opponents to make sure they're seeking glory in the right places. Like most of us, they liked to 'accept glory from one another' (v44): but Jesus calls them to restore glory to its true home – to 'seek the glory that comes from the only God'. Ultimately the only true source of glory is God himself. We are to seek God's glory first and foremost, not our own.

As the verse implies, God is also able to bestow this glory on others – but that is God's initiative, not ours, and the rest of the gospels make it clear that God's definition of glory turns our values upside down. It is bestowed in humility and service – in other words, in the very opposite actions which tend to attract human glory.

God's glory is a beautiful thing. And there's something fitting that the Lord's Prayer finishes with this acclamation: 'For the kingdom, the power, *and the glory* are yours, now and forever. Amen.' Why not close your devotions today with that prayer, and especially that last line. Glory is God's alone. And may that glory be manifest in our lives today.

Day 53 – John 6:1-15 'The miracle of multiplication'

At the front of St Mary's churchyard in Wavendon is a big oak tree. You have to walk under it every time you come up the path to the church door. And at the moment, the tree is shedding its leaves, and also thousands of acorns. I became very aware of that as I was standing outside the church after the Sunday service last week and wherever I put my feet – crunch, crunch, crunch. It must be heaven for squirrels.

Pick up any one of those acorns and you have the potential for a new tree, also able to produce, in time, thousands of acorns. Biologists will no doubt explain that in evolutionary terms – that only a tiny proportion of seeds (acorns) are able to get into the soil and propagate, so the production of thousands is necessary for the oak to ensure its own survival. And that's all well and good. (And good for the squirrels!)

But I also to think of it as *the miracle of multiplication*. We can see it across nature. One organism has the capacity to produce thousands of others like it. The apple I had for breakfast this morning from the tree in our garden had 3 pips in it, which in turn could theoretically grow another 3 trees, each yielding hundreds of apples per year.

This is not to diminish Jesus' outstanding miracle in our passage today, as one packed lunch multiplied to feed thousands of people – possibly the most famous miracle of all, and the only one which appears in all four gospels. But sometimes we like to divorce it from the natural world, treating it more like 'magic': I think it's better to observe that Jesus transforms the inherent capacities of nature and harnesses them entirely for God's glory. He demonstrates the miracle of multiplication in a glorious and transcendent way.

And it is a miracle. Loaves can't reproduce, in or of themselves. Neither can fish out of water. But what Jesus does is not something 'unnatural' – rather it is *nature transformed and radiating God's glory*. It is how the world entirely in harmony with God's purposes is meant to function. Where all are divinely provided for, where there is abundance, where life multiplies.

And we too can take heart that *God is able to multiply our small offerings*. That life in harmony with God's purposes is inherently fruitful. It multiplies, and blesses those around us with the overflow of its abundance.

What might that look like for you? It may not mean great acts, rather small acts offered with great love. But let's offer our mustard seeds of faith and action, trusting that God will miraculously multiply them today.

Day 54 – John 6:1-15 (ii) 'Nothing wasted'

A few years ago at the church where I previously ministered we started what would now be called a 'fresh expression' of church. It was a new congregation which met in a hall on Sunday morning, and was designed to reach families and others who perhaps didn't feel entirely at home in a more traditional church setting.

It started well. We had 45 to our first meeting, and there was a real buzz in the room. But over the coming months, the initial enthusiasm waned. We couldn't quite get the right 'DNA' to the venture and some of the early attendees stopped coming. After six months, we were down to about 15, and with my season of training coming to an end, the future leadership of the venture was uncertain. We reluctantly took the decision to call it a day. It had been an exciting experiment, but it just hadn't flown.

About two years later I caught up with some of the key group that had invested in it. After we left, the group had decided to keep meeting in one of their homes. They all felt a natural connection, and wanted to experiment some more with 'doing church differently' as a group of families. They were still part of 'regular church' but every couple of weeks they also shared together, and it was going really well. Deeper friendships were forming and they felt energised in faith. They admitted that they never would have pursued it were it not for the 'failed' church plant which preceded it.

In the kingdom of God, nothing is wasted. There is really no such thing as failure, only insight into where is God is leading next. After feeding the 5,000 Jesus too insists that leftover food be picked up, declaring: 'Let nothing be wasted' (v12).

There are, of course, other conclusions that can be drawn from Jesus' words. There is a welcome invitation to careful stewardship, perhaps especially timely in our current season of consumer debt and environmental pressure. Abundant as life is, the earth's resources are not unlimited and our culture of waste is unsustainable.

There is also the particular importance of looking after our food stores. With an estimated 2 million tons of food being thrown away annually just in the UK (or 30 kg per person), Jesus' words constitute a prophetic challenge to our way of life.

These are all well and good – but today I want to point towards another conclusion: nothing dedicated to God is ever wasted. *Every act, every word, every prayer we offer matters.* It all makes a difference.

Today, wherever you are, and however you feel, take heart from this encouragement: whatever you offer to God matters – nothing is wasted. Jesus' kingdom is able to bless all that we are and all that we do, for his sake.

Day 55 – John 6:1-15 (iii) 'King by force?'

October 2020 marked the 540th anniversary of the start of the Spanish Inquisition. There are a number of episodes in the history of the Church of which it isn't proud, but the Inquisition must rank as one of the worst. The imposition of 'orthodox' belief through violence, torture and intimidation did huge damage to the credibility of those who claimed to follow the way of Christ, and thousands of people lost their lives as a result.

Among the many shameful conclusions of this episode in church history, not the least is that imposing faith or 'the will of God' through force is *a path explicitly rejected by Jesus*. Time and again Jesus refuses either power or coercion to achieve his purposes. In today's passage, after the outstanding miracle feeding thousands, the air is ripe for revolution. Many of his followers have concluded (rightly) that he is the Messiah, which must mean (wrongly) that his next job is to raise an army and fight the occupying power.

Jesus is having none of it: 'knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, [Jesus] withdrew again to a mountain by himself' (v15).

Authority is not the same as power. Jesus possesses all the authority of the universe. But he refuses worldly power. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The human soul is susceptible to the love of power and control, and many a great person has been led astray by this temptation.

Jesus refuses to play that game. His kingdom is not of this world. And so he withdraws to refocus on his true mission: to bring the abundant life of God into human hearts and lives. To see a society founded on the principle of *agape* love (i.e. selfless service), humility and grace.

Few of us possess worldly power. But *we carry the authority of the King*. Today, let's both pray for those who do exercise worldly power, that their hearts would be yielded to God and rooted in love and service. And let's also take heart that God continues his extraordinary work in our lives – and the lives of those we pray for and bless – without 'power' but with divine authority.

Day 56 – John 6:16-21 'Obedience in testing times'

'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' So the Lord declares to his people in the great prophecy of Isaiah (55:9). It's both a wonderful and an unsettling thought. Much as we always long to see the whole picture, God is simply *bigger* than us; and although we rejoice in his extraordinary love and grace, we can't always fathom exactly what he's thinking. We simply have to trust, and, as far as we can, obey.

The disciples must have felt like this in today's passage. Jesus has just completed an outstanding miracle, but is troubled by the response of the crowd, who harbour designs of revolution: so he withdraws to avoid further repercussions (v15). In Matthew's version of this famous story, we learn that Jesus tells the disciples to get cracking and row over to the other side of the lake, despite the fact that (a) it's dark; (b) they're on their own without him, and (c) the weather is notoriously temperamental, and high winds across the lake are common (and dangerous at night).

What is Jesus up to? In truth, we don't know for sure. Certainly it is a test of obedience; but it might also be a genuine concern for their safety – with rumours of revolution they need to keep a low profile as much as he does; it might simply be that they need to get home, as their destination is Capernaum; or it might, as Matthew emphasises, be another chance to demonstrate Jesus' authority and identity. Perhaps all of these are part of the answer! Life is rarely binary.

But whatever the reason, the disciples find themselves in the middle of the night in some difficulty (v18) – and afraid. Where is Jesus? What is he up to?

There are times when this is our reality too. Perhaps this season is just such a time. Perhaps it's something else, either now or in the past. And we feel afraid. But let's take heart in what Jesus does next: *he returns to them*. He *reveals* his power and glory. And he *reassures* them: 'It is I: don't be afraid' (v20).

In the high winds and rough seas of life, Jesus is our sure companion. His ways are not always easy – but they are higher, and their purpose is our ultimate good and blessing. It sometimes feels risky to trust: but today, let's seize faith and ask God for grace to trust again. He is there: don't be afraid.

Day 57 – John 6:22-24 'Giving thanks'

If you had to describe the feeding of the 5,000 in one short phrase, how would you do it? I imagine many of you would use words like 'a great sign', or 'a spectacular miracle'. Some of you might point to the way Jesus involved and mentored the disciples, others to the basketfuls left over.

But how does John describe it? Not how you'd expect. 'After the Lord had given thanks.' (v23) No reference to the multiplication or the miracle. No reference to the little boy, the organisation or the leftovers. According to John, the key marker was that *Jesus had given thanks for the food*.

Some context is useful here. It is traditional at the start of a Jewish meal for the head of the household to bless the bread and break it. The blessing is called the *hamotzi*, and the usual words in English are: 'Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.' (Traditional churches sometimes use a form of it just before communion.) So, on one level, it is normal for a Jew like John to use 'giving thanks' as shorthand for what happens next.

But I don't think that's the whole story. Elsewhere John refers to miracles as 'works' or 'signs' rather than 'thank offerings'. He even does so later in this chapter.

It reminds me *how important the act of thanking God is when it comes to the eating of food*. Food is a fundamental part of God's goodness and provision in our lives. Humans might plant, harvest, distribute and cook food – but it is God who ultimately provides it. It's no coincidence that 'Give us this day our daily bread,' is the central phrase Jesus gave us in the Lord's Prayer, tying together the phrases in the first half which seek God's glory, and those in the second which invoke God's help.

Saying grace at meals has somewhat fallen out of favour recently, even in Christian circles. As a child, I was raised with it at every meal: something simple during the week, like 'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful,' and on Sundays, all holding hands round the table, something grander: for example, singing the chorus from 'We plough the fields and scatter' or 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.' Graces can be long and wordy, or short and pithy: 'Heavenly Pa, ta' is the shortest one I know!

But I must confess to being less conscientious in thanking God before every meal than I used to be. And today's passage has challenged me on that. It's not just that the miracle happened as Jesus thanked God for the food; it is the miracle of God's provision *every time* we thank God for the food.

Life is gift. And food is an integral part of life. You may be much better than me at saying grace. But either way, let's renew our commitment to gratitude, especially for the food that we enjoy. 'All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above – then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.' Amen!

Day 58 – John 6:25-29 'Food that endures'

2020 has been a particularly bumper year for the apple trees in our garden. And last weekend I picked the last full box which doesn't require a ladder and precarious balancing. The apples are wonderfully red, and look very enticing; but there is cautionary note. This weekend I need to wrap them individually. It's a bit tedious, to be honest, but more than once over the years we've stored a box in the garage and then fished it out a couple of months later, only to find that a couple of rotten apples have spoiled the whole box.

Food spoils. It's the natural way of things. Most of us have little grey or brown or green bins in our kitchen to recycle our leftovers – much of which a few days earlier was perfectly edible food. And it's just as well that it does spoil – left to its own devices, food waste becomes incredible fertiliser benefitting next year's crop. Nature has a remarkable way of renewing itself.

That said, the benefits of food are temporary. However good (or big) our meal is, we need to eat again a matter of hours later. Jesus reminds the crowd of this in today's passage. They were all still excited at the miracle they'd just witnessed, but Jesus warns them to be careful not to misinterpret it (v26). Their Roman rulers were well known for using 'bread and circuses' as an effective distraction to keep the population preoccupied; food is necessary, but it's not the be all and end all, and it doesn't determine the nature of Jesus' mission. Jesus is not here to rule an earthly kingdom: as he says to Pilate later, his kingdom is not of this world.

Instead, Jesus encourages the crowd *to look for eternal food* – 'food that endures' (v27). Indeed he tells them to 'work' for it ahead of physical sustenance.

But there's a sting in the tail: it's not the sort of work they were expecting. Their enduring 'work' is to believe in Him. At first, this sounds either like a paradox or a cop-out. But believing is more than merely intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. Biblical belief is better translated as 'trust': it is something active, whole-hearted, it changes our lives and our lifestyles.

To believe in Jesus is to place our trust, our purpose, all that we are, in his hands. It's not about worldly power or material gain, which is where the crowd was getting him wrong. But it is the true work of God.

Today, let's choose again to place our trust in this Saviour, that we too might have our fill of his glorious eternal food. And may that fuel our lives, for his glory.

Day 59 – John 6:30-35 'Bread of heaven'

No-one sings their National Anthem like the Welsh. It remains one of my bucket list wishes to watch a Rugby match at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, just to hear 'Land of my Fathers' belted out by 72,000 Welsh rugby fans. Even now, whenever Wales play at home and the national anthem begins, the volume on the TV gets turned up way too loud and the hairs on my neck stand on end – especially if the accompanying picture, as often happens, is of a grizzled 18-stone prop singing his heart out with tears streaming down his face.

Usually some time before we get to the crescendo of the national anthems, there will also be a rendition of 'Guide me O thou great Jehovah' – and no doubt when you read the title for today, many of you immediately thought of the classic hymn. The words were written in the 18th century by William Williams – you can probably guess the land of his birth – but it wasn't until the words were set to the rousing tune Cwm Rhondda in 1904 by John Hughes that it became the unofficial soundtrack to the Welsh Revival and came to prominence.

The theology of the first verse comes straight from our passage today. As Jesus draws the parallel with God's miraculous provision of manna in the desert after the Exodus (you can read the story in Exodus 16), so now he is the 'bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (v33). As we saw yesterday, this is eternal sustenance, and Jesus summarises it perfectly in the iconic phrase of v35: *'I am the bread of life'*. Eternal, abundant life – the true life which God means for all of us to enjoy.

No wonder the crowd's imagination is stirred – heavenly bread? "Sir", they said, "always give us this bread." (v34) Feed us now and evermore – this is what we want!

As it happens, most of them eventually *don't* want it, once they realise the implications – a sad reality which dawns as the gospel goes on. But today, let's recapture the excitement of the crowd, and claim their first response as ours.

Where do you hunger today? Let the bread of heaven feed you – now and evermore. And may the words of William Williams's hymn be our prayer today:

*Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty, Hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me now and ever more; feed me now and ever more.*

Day 60 – John 6:35-40 'I am...'

Who are you? Or rather, if you were asked to describe yourself, what would you say? I am Matt, I am a middle-aged man, I am a sports fan, I am a resident of Milton Keynes, I am not quite as slim as I used to be... and so on.

Studded throughout John's gospel are seven answers to this question: seven ways that Jesus used to describe himself. But they're not quite the sort of thing we might say about ourselves! Which probably isn't a surprise... today, however, we read the first of them: 'I am the bread of life' (v35).

It's a natural follow-on from what Jesus has been saying in the last few verses. Life is found, Jesus has said, not just in physical sustenance, but in believing in him; in working for food that endures, eternal nourishment. It makes sense, then, for Jesus to summarise his teaching in this famous and striking phrase: 'I am the bread of life.'

To know life, we must 'feed on' Jesus. As the church grew, this sense of feeding naturally became associated with the act of receiving bread and wine, which is variously called Communion, the Eucharist (from the word 'to give thanks'), the Mass (the old word for 'feast') or the Lord's Supper.

That's all well and good, and it gives us a tangible 'hook' to interpret the phrase - but this is probably not the first meaning. Since, from what he's just been saying, Jesus is quite clearly drawing a distinction with the physical act of eating bread, it much more likely means a *spiritual* union with Jesus – to trust in him, to receive his Spirit, to be filled with his abiding presence day by day.

And let's go a little further and note that the very phrase 'I am' is significant. In Greek it's heavily emphasised by Jesus in the words *Ego eimi* – I Am: capital I, capital A. The name God gave the Israelites, the name so holy that no Jew would speak it – Yahweh – is almost impossible to transcribe, but in Greek it is usually rendered as (you guessed it) 'I Am'.

So this is more than just a striking description of Jesus' mission and purpose. It points towards his identity at the very deepest and most profound level. Jesus is not just a good human being, he is the divine Son, God on earth in human form.

So as we feed on this bread of life, *we are not just receiving something that leads us towards God, we are feeding on God himself.* Jesus dwells in us by his Spirit – not just for a few hours until we need to eat again, but permanently. No wonder Jesus was able to say: 'if you feed on me, you won't go (spiritually) hungry again' (v35).

As we begin this week, let's give thanks for this gift of the bread of life. Let's consciously choose to receive it again. And let's resolve to keep 'feeding' on the abiding presence of Christ, nourishing our lives every hour of every day.

Day 61 – John 6:35-40 (ii) 'Who chooses?'

Do you choose God or does God choose you?

It's a good question, isn't it, and it's one which people have debated since time immemorial. And it's a vital one too, as it sits at the heart of the relationship between divine authority and human free will. Just how free are we? Are our actions all pre-determined? Or does God give us real capacity to make our own choices?

Over the centuries whole Christian movements have been founded on differing interpretations of this question. At one end, there are doctrinal systems like Calvinism which, at its extreme end, insist that all actions are predetermined by God, so that even what we consider to be 'free' choices are in fact foreseen within the will of God.

Towards the other end, there are viewpoints like Arminianism which assert that God gives us free choices, so that, whilst God remains in overall charge, what he essentially creates for humans is a space within which humans can exercise choice. Put bluntly, the will of God can be resisted.

These might sound like dry arguments now, but they have had a huge impact on Western culture – not just in church life, but in wider society. They also dramatically affect how we see God. One poor church leader in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries changed his mind (in print) several times as to whether he was eternally saved or eternally damned, since according to a strict Calvinist interpretation of things, he had no say in the matter!

But what does Jesus think about all this? What's fascinating is that *Jesus is quite happy to agree to both viewpoints*. It's right here in v37: 'All those the Father gives me will come to me (divine sovereignty), and whoever comes to me I will never drive away (human free will).'

What if the answer is not either/or, but both/and? What if God is in charge, *and* we are free? So God is still authentically God, and we are still authentically human? As my dad's old vicar used to say: 'Perhaps when we look back, we can agree that God did indeed choose us; but no-one can say: "I cannot come to God, because God does not choose me."'

This is indeed good news! Today let's rejoice that *God chooses us* – and that is important, we're not left on our own, frantically reaching out in the darkness, wondering if God is there. Let's also rejoice that *we can choose God, too*. Today, make that choice. And do so, knowing and rejoicing that God will never drive you away. Amen, thanks be to God!

Day 62 – John 6:35-40 (iii) 'I shall lose none'

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty good at losing things. It can be all kinds of things, but it's usually my glasses. I'll take them off temporarily while doing something else and wander off – then an hour or so later I'll have to retrace my steps to work out where I might have put them down. As they've got thin, dark frames they tend to camouflage quite easily. I probably need some of those glasses that Prue Leith wears on The Great British Bake-Off, which you couldn't miss wherever you left them.

It's unsettling to lose something. It reminds us that we're not perfect or as much in control as we'd like to be. It's not that the item isn't important to us, it's just that we get distracted and make mistakes. It's the human condition.

It's tempting to wonder if Jesus is like that too. Perhaps for many of us especially who've grown up with dominant images of the 'hippy traveller' Jesus, so popular in the 60s and 70s, wandering round Palestine in sandals with long hair and a languid expression, it's easy to imagine that he might have the odd brain-blip.....

Not a bit of it!

Jesus is a man on a mission. And whilst his deep humanity seeps through every page of the gospels, he remains the divine Saviour throughout, a sure and certain hope for all of us. And here in our last look at today's passage, he sums it up in this glorious truth: 'I shall lose none of all those [the Father] has given me' (v39).

Jesus never 'loses' people. We might sometimes loosen our grip, but he never loses hold of us. We are safe in his presence and he has the love and the power to bring us safely home. Thanks to Jesus, all who look to him will enjoy eternal life (v40) and God will raise us up at the end of time. This last point is so important Jesus says it twice in quick succession – in v39 and v40. In other words, he really, *really* wants us to grasp the full reality of what that means!

Our present feels uncertain. But our future is secure. And that means our present is actually secure too, since *Jesus will never leave us or lose us.*

Today, let's look to the Son and spend a few moments dwelling on this beautiful truth. Jesus has never lost you, Jesus doesn't lose you now, and Jesus will never lose you. You are safe in him, and his plan for you is abundant and eternal life. May that truth, and that life, be yours today.

Day 63 – John 6:41-51 'All taught by God'

'I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.' So quipped Groucho Marx, and it's one of my favourite quotes. I'm not much of a 'clubbable' person either. But Groucho puts his finger on a deeper truth here. There's something in us humans that likes to create a 'them' and 'us' mentality. We define ourselves by our 'tribes', and that gives us a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

It is also deeply divisive. Some people are in, some are out. And sadly, this mentality can also affect matters of faith. For all that matters of belief – of all things – should be dealing with universal questions, we find it hard to resist the temptation to sink into the 'club' mentality.

In our passage today, Jesus faces more grumbling. At its root, the discontent stems from two very human failings. Jesus' message is being questioned because he both wants to widen the club; and also he doesn't appear to be 'the right sort' in the first place. Underneath these debates lies a fundamental question: who gets access to God? Is it only members of a particular group?

In later chapters Jesus will address the question of whether one particular human group has special access to God in more detail. But here, the root of the grumbling is more to do with his humble background. 'How can he say these things,' the leaders mutter, 'when we know where he comes from?' (v42) A divine messenger couldn't have a human mother and father, surely? Especially not a Northern carpenter's background!

Jesus challenges this by reminding them of God's greater plan for all humanity. He quotes directly from their greatest prophet, Isaiah: 'They will all be taught by God.' (v45) In other words, hundreds of years before Jesus came, *God's plan was always that access to God would be available to everyone*. God's blessing was for all nations (this goes way back to Abraham in Genesis 12), and all can now come to God the Father and know eternal life.

The 'way in' is Jesus: 'I am the living bread.... Whoever eats this bread will live forever.' (v51) And we too are beneficiaries of this great truth! Thanks to Jesus, we have free and full access to God. We are no longer shut out of the club, we are part of the family now.

This is a hard section of John's gospel, but let's rejoice in this simple truth today. *All of us can know God now*. All of us can walk with him and draw strength in his abiding presence. Where would you like God to teach you more today? Why not ask him? It's a promise.

Day 64 – John 6:51-59 'Given for the life of the world'

Of all the many changes we are required to live by at present, not the least for many of those in the Christian community is the loss of the capacity to share bread and wine together. Some churches – like ours – are able to do so occasionally at home, but it remains a somewhat solitary act, shorn of the usual sense of unity and community.

Since the earliest days of the church, sharing bread and wine has been vitally important to our community life. It was commanded by Jesus, and although the exact format of its expression varies hugely across cultures, its essence takes us back to the heart of our good news. *Jesus gave himself 'for the life of the world' (v51).*

As Jesus continues his debate with the religious leaders – who are by now arguing among themselves (v52), he now refers much more explicitly to the sacrifice he will be called to make. Thus far, his references to feeding on him as the bread of life have been open to interpretation, but now he is much more blunt: his flesh and blood must be received to know the life of God within us (v53-56, repeated every verse, to ram home its importance).

Scholars have long debated whether this 'feeding' is literal or spiritual, and certainly the connection to the physical act of sharing bread and wine, later celebrated by the church in remembrance of Jesus, is inescapable. But in a way the debate as to whether it is physical or spiritual is irrelevant, since Jesus as the Divine Son carries both the physical and spiritual within himself. It is, surely, both.

Which is especially good news for us at the moment, in these days when the physical act of sharing bread and wine is limited. Even when we can't share Communion/Eucharist/Mass, we can still 'feed' on Jesus spiritually and receive his life.

Ultimately the references to flesh and blood point to Jesus' death on the cross – his life offered for us all, that we might receive God's new life, forever (v58). The greatest act of human history, in many ways the pivot of *all* history: God's sacrifice of himself for our forgiveness and healing.

Today, take a few moments to go back to the cross. Give thanks for what Jesus did for the world – and for you. And receive his forgiveness, his healing, his hope, his *life*, again.

Day 65 – John 6:60-66 'The source of life'

I was once told a story attributed to David Watson, the famous Christian leader, and one-time vicar of St Michael-le-Belfry in York. After a particularly stirring service, a student approached him at the end asking to commit his life to Jesus. Watson's response, so the story goes, went something along the lines of: 'Don't be ridiculous! You do realise what it's going to cost you? Go away and pray about it this week, and if you're still ready to commit your life, come and find me next Sunday.'

A week later, the student did indeed return, and committed his life to the Lord.

Some of you may have raised an eyebrow at the minister's response. Accustomed as we mostly are to trying to make faith look as attractive as possible, it's shocking to see someone apparently go out of their way to put people off!

But the approach has good precedent. Look closely at the gospels and you'll see Jesus does exactly that on numerous occasions. As someone once summarised: Jesus came to comfort the disturbed... *and* disturb the comfortable.

Here in John chapter 6, just such an encounter has taken place. Jesus knows that many of the crowd have got the wrong end of the stick about him, expecting their Messiah to be all about glory and conquest. They even want to impose this vision on him, whether he likes it or not (v15). So Jesus spends much of chapter 6 setting them straight. He is indeed the key to true life, but the path to this life is through surrender not conquest (v29), through spiritual growth not physical successes (v27, vv49-50), and ultimately through his sacrificial death (v51-59).

'This is a hard teaching,' the crowd responds, 'who can accept it?' (v60) The end result is that many give up on Jesus, disappointed that he's not the Messiah they wanted (v66). Something easier next time, please!

It's unsettling to reflect on this aspect of Jesus' teaching. But at the same time, we can acknowledge that Jesus was led by absolute integrity, and that he was always refreshingly clear about what his mission would cost both himself and his followers. It is the narrow path, the road less travelled, the call to surrender and to sacrifice alongside the joy, the hope, the peace and the love which accompanies it. Indeed, what we often find is that this *joy, hope, peace and love comes precisely through the surrender and sacrifice*. It sounds strange, but it is the kingdom way, God's way.

Jesus knows this – his words are 'Spirit and life' (v63) – and so *he calls us unashamedly to the true path of life*. Human success models ultimately can never succeed for long – which is one way of paraphrasing 'the flesh counts for nothing' – it is the life of the Spirit which endures.

May God grant us grace to receive these challenging words afresh today, and thus to receive the true life of God, imparted by the Spirit of Jesus. May his joy, hope, peace and love be ours, too.

Day 66 – John 6:66-71 'To whom would we go?'

'Where else could we go?' Paraphrasing Peter's response in v68 of today's passage in this way does carry a certain bittersweet irony for us today. This is the first reflection after the weekend's announcement of a new national lockdown, and many of us might well be voicing similar sentiments at present. Life has just got more, well, constrained again. You may well be feeling that, come Thursday, there will be nowhere to go... again.

I'm never at ease shoehorning passages to fit a particular moment, but there is something very timely that we somehow ended up at this passage today. It's worth me confessing that I don't have a 'plan' for these reflections that goes beyond two or three days in advance. I had no idea that we would be at this point on this day – as it happens, looking at 6:66 as our 66th daily reading in John. At this rate we'll get over 230 readings if we did the whole of the gospel – now there's a thought!

So what encouragement can we take from today? The context is something equally hard to swallow for Jesus' disciples. He's not the Messiah they thought he'd be; the journey he'd just committed himself – and them – to suddenly looked a whole lot harder than it did when wine was pouring out of wedding jars, and bread was being liberally distributed around the shore of Galilee.

Was it time to quit?

Peter's response contains both realism and hope. Realism in that deep down he knows there's no alternative to Jesus, no plan B. But hope in that he also declares the truth that is our hope, too: Jesus, 'you have the words of eternal life... [We know that] you are the Holy One of God.' (v69)

The world is pretty rough at the moment. *But we have hope.* A hope that is not dependent on our government, our personal resources or our capacity to fight a pandemic. Our hope goes deeper. It is in Jesus' *identity* – the Holy One of God – and his *words*, which have the power to bring life.

Jesus is a sure companion in these turbulent times. One who is loving, loyal and true. One who never leaves us. One who delights to give us rest, and whose peace is a gift which transcends understanding. One whose promise goes beyond the grave, but also brings comfort and even joy in the here and now.

These are the words of life, spoken by the only one whose word is completely trustworthy. Take a few moments today to feed on those words most inspiring for you. Our lives are held by this God – and for that we give thanks, and cry out in hope:

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb: praise and glory, wisdom and thanks, honour and power and strength, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.