

Pathways

The magazine for the people of the Diocese of Oxford | Autumn 2021 | **FREE**

Good connections

meet you on the other side



PLUS: How to go to church | Living forgiveness | Mending ourselves

Hello



I hope that you have been able to rest and step back from the demands of work, ministry and domestic chores for a short time, even if you could not be away on holiday physically.

This has been a demanding season for us all. Regular, planned rest is vital to allow mind and body and soul to recover and to allow space for re-orientation and recreation.

The Contemplative Toolkit is a suite of resources drawing on Ignatian prayer practices tailored for use at home, in churches and in schools. Why not try out the mending practice featured on page 11, which follows Liz Jackson's excellent article about forgiveness.

Part of being a contemplative church will be to reflect carefully on how our communities are and where our churches are at. One of my major projects this year will be to attempt to visit every part of the diocese to listen and learn and to be with the people of God as we regather and rebuild.

I recently walked and cycled across the deaneries of Buckingham, Newport Pagnell and Milton

Keynes as part of an annual pilgrimage postponed from 2020. Pilgrimages are something everyone can do to nurture and sustain our inner life. Do consider joining the St Frideswide Pilgrimage to our cathedral in October. You'll find details on the back page.

And in November, I hope to begin a series of visits to every deanery. I'll be spending time with clergy and lay leaders and listening again to where we are as a Church. Look out for regular reports on the website.

Finally, like so many aspects of life, *Pathways* paused during the pandemic. The magazine is for disciples and inquirers alike – everyone who wants to think afresh about faith, inequality and what it means to be human. Be sure to share the magazine with friends and neighbours, and do let the team know your ideas and suggestions for future articles.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Oxford".

Bishop Steven

Bishop Steven was appointed to the Lords Select Committee for the Environment and Climate Change in April. Sign up for regular environment news from the diocese and access our new environment hub at oxford.anglican.org/environment

Contents



- 4** Around the diocese
- 6** God in the life of...
The Revd Phyllis Sopp
- 8** Step one
How to go to church
- 10** Jesus on...
Living forgiveness
- 12** Opinion
Choosing a church
- 15** Come and eat...
The profound and wonderful meal at the heart of our faith
- 18** Focus on...
Perfectionism
- 20** Dwelling in the Word
- 22** A prayer for hope
- 23** Who told you?



We hope you enjoy reading *Pathways*. Email or write and let us know what you think. Contributor enquiries are welcome.

Pathways is published four times a year by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Finance. To receive the magazine regularly, or to order bundles for your church, please get in touch.

Follow us on Twitter and Facebook for local news and prayers.

To get in touch with *Pathways* call **01865 208200**, email us at communications@oxford.anglican.org or write to *Pathways* Magazine, Church House Oxford, Langford Locks, Kidlington, OX5 1GF



Pathways is printed locally in Hook Norton by kmslitho.co.uk using FSC® certified wood-free uncoated paper. When you're done, cut it up for the church notice board, use it for children's group activities or pop it in the recycling bin.

Design by 15-north.co.uk
Words and photographs © Oxford Diocese 2021, unless otherwise indicated.

UK registered charity number 247954
ISSN 2632-0401

Sarah Bourne



Community wellbeing

St Mary's, Banbury was awarded c.£90,000 over three years from the Development Fund to help support a stipendiary Chaplain for the Arts, the Revd Sarah Bourne. Sarah has been developing a range of church-based transformational and creative activities to help the local community cope with the restrictions of COVID-19 and to rebuild shared lives in an increasingly fractured society.

oxford.anglican.org/development-fund

Emma Thompson



Digital upgrades

An anonymous donor has gifted the diocese a grant to support churches installing broadband to facilitate livestreaming. So far, 30 churches across the diocese have been successful in obtaining funding to support broadband access. There is still over £20,000 available, and churches can apply for up to £1,000 to support 4G and fixed-line broadband installation and activation.

oxford.anglican.org/capital-fundraising

For regular news and updates, visit the website:
oxford.anglican.org/news





Intercultural mission and ministry

In Slough, St Paul's wanted a shift in ethnic and cultural integration in the diocese. They had a vision to support churches nurturing intercultural worshipping communities through mentoring and a dedicated intercultural 'Greenhouse'. This is a step closer, thanks to the Archbishops' Council approving their application to become a Resourcing Hub. Find out about Greenhouses at: oxford.anglican.org/growing-new-congregations



Josh Green / ROC

Diocese sponsors music video

After a rise in knife crime incidents across Reading, a music video was produced for Redeeming Our Communities' No More Knives initiative. The video was supported by the Diocese of Oxford, Reading Football Community Trust and the Thames Valley Police and highlighted the difficulties and effects of knife crime on young people.

oxford.anglican.org/knifecrime

We're on social media too.
Search 'Diocese of Oxford'
on Facebook and Instagram.

*"I see myself...
demonstrating God's
love in practical ways"*



Phyl in her role as assistant curate at St Luke's, Maidenhead and in full PPE equipment.



Phyllis Sopp

The Revd Phyllis Sopp says she's always had a faith, with church being part of her life from a young age, whether through attending Sunday school or reading Bible stories at bedtime and praying with her family.

Through God and her wider church family, Phyl met friends and created relationships which would be instrumental in helping her decide the paths she would follow in life.

One such relationship was with her secondary school physics teacher, a Christian, who showed her it was possible to blend science and religion in harmony. From there, a lifelong passion and commitment to helping others through nursing and ministry ensued.

"I have a firm belief that I was called by God to be both a nurse and an ordained minister and each is integral to who I am and how I fulfil each role."

As Phyl became a mother to three daughters, her faith became increasingly important to her. Thanks to a stint in America with her family, where they attended an Episcopalian church, she was exposed to other forms of worship and began to think differently about her faith and how it was intrinsically and uncompromisingly linked with her life.

Around this time, Phyl began to sense her calling but as she says, it was a slow burn as life with a

young family got in the way! Eventually she couldn't ignore it any more and spoke to her local vicar, who asked whether she had thought about ministry – something that hadn't even crossed her mind.

Fast forward nearly two decades and Phyl is now a non-stipendiary minister and assistant curate at St Luke's, Maidenhead, where she has been able to juggle her nursing work as part of the team delivering COVID-19 vaccinations in her community with ministry commitments.

"My faith helps me to understand that God has called me and has given me the grace to manage the necessary juggling.

"It has been the privilege of my life to support the community both pastorally and practically to help enable a return to normality. Whilst it has been heart-breaking to see the hardships faced by so many, it has been wonderful to see and be part of a community that has pulled together – the positive effect of seemingly small acts of kindness should never be underestimated." 🙏

Words: Sarah Bowie

Photo: Supplied by the Revd Phyllis Sopp



To discover more about the inspiring lives of the people of our diocese, visit oxford.anglican.org/god-in-the-life-of

Durham University found **one in four people** across the UK have engaged in some form of online worship since lockdown began.

“In real-term figures, this would see the attendance at online corporate religion rising from **4 million** per Sunday to **19 million** during the pandemic.”

Premier Christian News, August 2020

44 million page views on *A Church Near You...* **Over 250,000 questions** asked to Alexa/smart speaker apps about the Church of England.

More than **4,200 clergy** and local church leaders have taken part in remote digital training courses so far this year, **four times** the number in 2019.

Church of England statistics, October 2020

Roughly half of the country's young people (18-34) indicated that they regularly engage in online faith-related activity.

Premier Christian News, August 2020

“However, we’ve been really careful to make sure that those members of the congregation who feel a little wary of online streaming can still access what they need.”

*Derek Lancaster, Licensed Lay Minister,
All Saints, High Wycombe*

1/5 attending national online service go to church infrequently or not at all.

Christian Today, October 2020

St Peter and St Paul, Great Missenden offered two online services on a Sunday, one at 8am, which attracted approximately **60 people** and one at 10am, which had on average **200 participants** – significantly more than on-site services held prior to lockdown.

How to go to church

Was your first experience of church online? Are you thinking about trying on-site church? Here are a few ideas to help you make a start.

Which church?

Churches come in many traditions, shapes and sizes. Look at a church's website to get an idea of what it's like, and which service might suit you. Check whether you have to book because of Covid restrictions.

Do I need to tell someone I'm coming?

No, just turn up at the church a few minutes before the service is due to begin. Visitors and newcomers are welcome at every church. If you want to bring children and you're not sure whether that will work, call or email a contact on the website.

Getting through the door

Church doors can look very 'churchy' and solid. The door might be closed or only open a crack, even when a service is due to begin. Don't be put off – there will be friendly faces inside and people like you who can probably remember being new to church themselves. It might help you to take a friend with you. Don't be afraid to say hello to someone and tell them that you are new or visiting for the first time.

Where should I sit?

When you're new, it's often useful to sit in the middle or near the back where you can see what others do. This might help if you feel nervous about when to stand up and sit down.

What will I have to do?

Hopefully, you'll feel comfortable enough to join in with the service. But you don't have to join in,

it's fine to watch. This is worth remembering if everyone is invited to the front to share bread/ bread and wine (called Communion) or to receive a blessing. If you want to join in, great. If you're not sure, you can stay in your seat. Anyone who has been christened or received communion in a different church can receive communion.

What if I can't follow the service?

Don't worry! It's up to the person leading the service to indicate where you have got to in the order of service. Sometimes they leave out a section in a prayer book, so it's worth looking ahead if you are lost.

At the end...

Pause a while! Try to say something to someone who's been sitting near you. In normal times an invitation to have coffee is a chance to meet people. If this is not possible, a chat in the open air helps you make connections.

What next?

It can take courage to start something new, but God is in this too, and God loves you. So, is this the time to take that next step? 🙏

Words: The Revd Gill Lovell



Many people are asking deep questions of faith for the first time. If that's you, visit oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see

Living forgiveness

“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:25)

I am sitting at a table, supporting refugees with their English lessons. The women’s conversation turns, as it often does, to their lost homes and former lives in Lebanon. The horror of what has happened to them is told. The destruction of their homes, the torture of their men folk, the loss of their loved ones are fresh scars. They talk of the “others” who inflicted the harm on them. The “others” are named – “the Muslims” says one woman, “the Christians” says another. They look at one another across the table, as their children play together at their feet and they share the same pot of tea and pass round paper and pens. They smile and they shrug and they say, “Not you, sister.”

These women who hated one another once, in another life, who feared one another and, in the very early days of their new life in the UK, would whisper to me so that “the other” couldn’t hear, because they did not trust one another, now found a new way.

We didn’t use words like forgiveness, but forgiveness had landed.

When the wound is small forgiveness comes easily (sometimes), but for larger and catastrophic wounds, it is much harder. What these women learnt quickly is that unless forgiveness happens nothing new happens. And they desired deeply something new.

They wanted a new start, a new life, because their old lives had been lost completely.

So they found a way to let go of the past hurts, and the blame. The pain didn’t disappear, and sometimes it was clear the anger hadn’t either, but in order to make something new, they knew that they had to let go and turn their faces forward.

Jesus talked about forgiveness a lot. He told us to do it – again and again. He told us to be prepared to receive it too.

And he did it himself, drawing criticism, and at the end he forgave those who had dragged him to the cross.

We are called to be Christ-like, for the sake of God’s world, and part of that is to be forgiving. We are not likely to have to forgive those who have crucified us, or informed on us, or driven us out of our homes. But we will all hold something against another. Now is the time to let it go.

Letting it go, forgiving, allows space for something new to happen. Spirit-led forgiveness makes room for freedom, for healing and for hope. And, of course, a new life filled with all those things. ¶

Words: The Revd Liz Jackson, Associate Archdeacon – Berkshire

Mending

As we move through these practices, we touch on some of the more difficult aspects of life. We address the hurt within ourselves. You can decide whether you choose something small or something big to offer to God for mending and healing.

For this practice you ideally need a stone or pebble which fits in your hand, but you could use something else which feels heavy. The practice focuses on forgiveness: forgiving others, forgiving ourselves, and receiving forgiveness from God to live more freely. It is at the heart of Christianity, and it is something that all humans need to do to live well and flourish.

1. Pick up

Find a comfortable, quiet place. Start with your pebble on the ground. Pick it up and think about something which has hurt you. It might be a small thing or a bigger thing. It might be a situation close to you, or more distant.

5. Go

You can leave the pebble on the ground or you can leave it with God. You could find, draw or make a simple cross, and place the stone there. Jesus had many 'stones' thrown at him, but he refused to throw them back and instead forgave.

Perhaps you also feel the need to be forgiven?

2. Hold

Hold your pebble tightly in your non-dominant hand (the hand you don't use to write). Picture the time you were hurt by this situation or person and allow yourself to feel the pain you still carry. It is a bit like being hit by a stone that has been thrown at you. Observe which emotions are involved. Notice what you feel in your body. Notice your thoughts too.



3. Throw?

Move the stone to your dominant hand (the one you use to throw). The stone could be used as a weapon; it was thrown at you and you could throw it back. Would that make anything better? How might it make things worse?

4. Let go

Feel the burden of the hurt inside. Ask, 'Who is suffering? Have I carried this weight for long enough? Am I willing to forgive?' If the answer is no, that's OK. If you are ready to let the burden go, silently say: 'Breathing in, I acknowledge the pain. Breathing out, I am forgiving _____. Repeat these words for as long as feels helpful.

oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see

**COME
AND
SEE**



It's not easy to forgive people for words and actions that have an impact on us. Try a gentle way to start with this 'Mending' practice in the Contemplative Toolkit. You can download it here: oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see

Choosing a church



The Revd Canon Janet Binns is the Rector of Hedsor with Bourne End.

When I was a child, my family and I attended the local church, within walking distance of our home. Nowadays, improved mobility enables many of us to travel to whichever church we choose.

However, I have always felt it was my duty to support the local church.

We are very privileged in that the Church of England is deeply embedded within the popular conception of village and town life, even in a secular age. Consequently, I feel that it's important to play an active role in the life of my local parish.

My husband spent 25 years in the Royal Air Force, which meant we were often on the move. Whilst living in London we attended the local Anglican church, about three minutes' walk from our home. Our daughter attended the local school and was part of the nearby Brownie pack. Through the church we got to know our neighbours and became actively involved in the life of the church and the wider community.

"It was my duty to support the local church"

Having said that, given the sheer breadth of belief in the Church of England on theological, liturgical, ecclesiological, social, and other issues, I acknowledge that it can be

difficult for many to choose their local parish church over a larger or possibly more active church down the road.

And yet, I believe that for someone attending the Church of England, to be truly Christian is to play an active role in the life and worship of one's local parish church, in spite of any such differences, unless the church falls outside of the Anglican mainstream.

We live in a consumer-driven society where the habit is to shop around for the familiar, the comfortable, that which satisfies us individually. But the church is not a club.

Travelling elsewhere can make attending regular worship services, Bible study, serving others and other church activities somewhat burdensome. Yet these activities are a necessary part of our spiritual development.

Janet's article continues overleaf

In each edition of *Pathways*, we ask two Christians with different perspectives to explore a topical issue. Too often we steer away from controversial issues, and as a result we make poorer decisions because we haven't benefitted from others' wisdom. We asked two people in our diocese: Should you attend the church that suits you or should you always attend your local church?

The Church of England prides itself on the parish system, having a church in every parish across the land. It's a wonderful system that has worked for centuries and is still working brilliantly!

However, over time society has changed, and the church is no exception to this. For some parishes the church is still central to community life, but for others it has moved into a more peripheral

space, often finding itself walking alongside community in a kind of partnership. Sadly, for some, the building itself has been closed, but that doesn't always mean that the church has closed down. This was clearly demonstrated by new online worship in lockdown.

Having been a rural priest for almost 20 years, I have had the blessed opportunity of seeing the church's distinct role in the tribal identity of village life. The parish church often carries lengthy histories of births, deaths and marriages of many families within their community, thus fulfilling

an official role and taking its place in their vocabulary as 'our church'.

However, this level of ownership seems to play out whether folk

are regular churchgoers or not. In some villages the church might be the only public building still standing.

I'm all for supporting your local church in whatever way you

can, be it financially, practically, or hopefully by making a spiritual connection. But what happens if what you seek in your local church can't be found? What do you do?

Despite a decline in church attendance over the years, one thing that keeps me hopeful is that spirituality seems to be on the rise.

People are definitely seeking something. They might not know what it is yet, but it is certainly something. Even before the pandemic, people were hungry for a more meaningful existence.



The Revd Canon Valerie Plumb is the Rural Dean for Mursley Deanery

"What happens if what you seek in your local church can't be found?"

Valerie's article continues overleaf

[Janet...]

A hundred years ago or so, things were very different. It was natural for people to attend the local church. I believe it was with this in mind that St Mark's, Bourne End, where I am the rector, was built to enable residents in Bourne End to worship locally rather than travel to St Paul's, Wooburn, a few miles down the road.

Even if my local parish church had a more liberal or conservative social outlook than I have, even if its liturgy were not to my taste, I would worship, and have worshipped, in the church nearest my home.

The pandemic has shown that being embedded in the local community enables the church to respond to the needs of those around us in a more meaningful way.

Jesus said that one of the greatest commandments is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). Surely loving those in our neighbourhood is our first priority? If the church is to be the hope of the world, we need to be visible where we live. ¶

Janet takes up the role of Area Dean for Burnham and Slough in September.

[Valerie...]

We should help these folks find their path in whatever way we can. It is my belief and experience that when God begins to speak, it is unique to the individual, often communicating and calling them in a language they understand.

It might be a call from the local church; it could be from the ministers or members of a differently resourced church; it might be an online course provided by a parish 20 miles up the road that speaks to their soul.

Or it might simply be a 'toe-dipping' experience of trying different churches and worship to see what fits best as they journey on.

I have always thought that the work of the church is to act as a mission station to help point others the way to go. Whether they join a local corporate body or encounter something elsewhere doesn't matter. Who are we to stand in God's way?

Supporting our local church is great; supporting others to find Christ is even greater. The journey toward God is often challenging, so it's critical to settle ourselves spiritually, and that means finding where we belong. It doesn't matter where you find God – as long as you do. ¶

Emerging from coronavirus

The journey of recovery will be slower than our journey into lockdown. Life is not going to be a quick return to the old normal, but rather a new living with the virus, certainly for the rest of this year and probably through next year too. Lockdown has been difficult but has also brought new insights, opportunities and priorities to the surface. Part of being a contemplative church will be to reflect carefully on lessons learned and next steps.

Emerging from Coronavirus, loosely framed by the Anglican Five Marks of Mission, is a tool to aid reflection, to discern prayerfully, and to plan strategically the shape of the mission of the Church in each of our contexts.



Emerging from Coronavirus invites you to reflect on what has been lost through the pandemic which we need to grieve for, what has been reduced that we need to let go of, what has been reduced that we need to build up again, and what has emerged that we need to respond to.

oxford.anglican.org/emerging-from-coronavirus

Looking to explore deeper? The Parish Planning Tool contains everything you need to navigate God's call for your church.

oxford.anglican.org/parish-planning-tool

Come and eat

Holy Communion is the profound, wonderful meal at the heart of our faith. **Bishop Steven** reflects on its place in our lives today.

We're yet to see what the winter months will bring, but this summer marked the end of a long period in which most of us were not able to worship on-site for much of the time. There was immense creativity and community in our online worship. "My Father's house has many Zooms," but as a Christian community, we also lost some of the core disciplines that sustain us.

Many of us missed singing with a congregation, missed the beauty and peace of our church buildings, and missed talking face to face with people. Most of all, I missed sharing in Holy Communion. We need to reset our sacramental life, and, as ever, scripture is our guide.

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 is about the exhausted prophet who has survived the greatest crisis of his life. Elijah has fled into the desert, is right at the end of his resources and he's had enough.

Sound familiar? Covid has stretched us far beyond what we thought we could endure. The vaccines have brought hope, but we're so very tired. The costs on our children and young people have been too high. The financial challenges seem acute. There is so much rebuilding to be done but so little energy to face the challenge.

"Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat".

He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him and said: "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you". He got up, ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God." (1 Kings 19.5-8).

The Old Testament story of Elijah is so very helpful to where we find ourselves today. The Lord meets Elijah where he is in the wilderness. He doesn't attempt to cheer him up. He doesn't talk much. He doesn't burden him with tasks or visions of the future. He doesn't spend time analysing his sermon on Mount Carmel to tell him how it could be improved.

The Lord, through his angel, sees what is needed. The Lord prepares a meal: fresh bread, cool, clear fresh water in a jar. Time to rest and sleep. Elijah eats, drinks and rests. Still it is not enough. Eat, drink, rest, repeat. Only then does the journey continue.

The Elijah story is the frame for understanding the feeding of the five thousand (see John 6).

It is a eucharistic story, a foreshadowing of Holy Communion. "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted".

This is the Lord who comes to serve and feed his people in the desert. There's an unbroken line from the story in John 6 to attending your parish church today. Tired and distracted as we are, we come forward to take bread and give thanks, to break it and give it. We share Holy Communion.

Receive these gifts through faith

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Jesus knows that we are flesh and blood. Our faith must be more than intellectual and cerebral. There must be aspects of our worship that we can do and feel and touch and taste which are accessible to everyone. This is the reason for this gift.

In the Eucharist we look back and remember the gift of manna in the wilderness, the Passover, the feeding miracles in the gospel and, of course, most of all, the Last Supper. The outward and visible sign is the bread and wine, which are taken and blessed and broken and given. The inward and spiritual grace is the sense of the Lord's presence, of Holy Communion with God, of resting in God's presence which comes as we receive together.

God's love made visible in Jesus Christ is offered to us in this sacrament of bread and wine. We eat and drink and receive Christ deep within us, to inspire and transform us from within from death to life, from hate to love, from fear to peace, from sadness to joy. We are being invited to eat and drink Jesus himself, to share in his life.

We do not receive these gifts through an intellectual understanding. A child is able to receive Holy Communion as a sacrament of God's

love just as an adult can. Someone with learning difficulties is able to find as much joy here as a university professor. We come as equals.

A sign of hope

The pandemic has left many of us deeply shaken and fearful. But what we've been through and the dangers that lie ahead must be held in the perspective of hope.

The Eucharist recalls us to hope, especially the hope of God's kingdom and the great feast to which God invites us in heaven. And we are a eucharistic church, called to gather around the table of the Lord.

This invitation to the banquet is for everyone. It is open to all. Christ's purpose, according to Ephesians, is nothing less than the creation of one new humanity in which all divisions are abolished through the cross. We are called to a radical hospitality of love which is itself a sign of the kingdom of God. This meal is especially for the poor, the despised, the lost and the least.

The world is not yet as God calls it to be. We are called to work together for that day when God's kingdom will be revealed in all its fulness and glory. As we gather around the table of the Lord, that hope is rekindled. Sunday by Sunday, we will be filled afresh with hope and a vision for what this world can become. It's when prophets are formed and where the world is changed.

Christian faith enables us to hold joy and suffering simultaneously because nothing we experience in this life is the end of the story. There is always something more and better and deeper unfolding. Every Eucharist is an invitation to acknowledge pain and suffering, and every Eucharist is an invitation to rediscover joy as we remember that God raised Jesus from the dead and his life flows through us.



Photo: Steven Buckley

God's grace

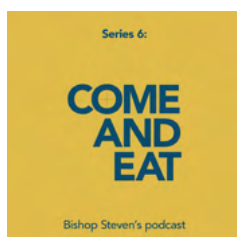
It may be harder than we think to reset our pre-pandemic disciplines of worship that have sustained the Church for over two thousand years. It can be as hard to form a good habit as it is to give up a bad one.

I want to encourage you to put yourself in the way of God's grace and rebuild the discipline of setting aside time on Sunday to respond to the Lord's invitation to gather around his table, and to do so in the church building if you can.

Holy Communion is the meal through which God will build up his tired and depleted church. God has set a table for you, a feast. It is the meal through which God reminds us Sunday by Sunday of who we are. It is the meal where Jesus Christ is both the host and the banquet: where we come and receive grace upon grace as we receive his presence and life in bread and wine.

We come to be sustained for the next part of the journey. We look back and we remember and find the centre of our faith again. We look forward to the great heavenly banquet in hope and in joy and we sing our message to the world. Come and eat. ¶

An edited extract from Bishop Steven's podcast series, *Come and Eat*. Search 'Bishop Steven Croft' wherever you get your podcasts, or visit blogs.oxford.anglican.org



Come to this table, not because you must but because you may, not because you are strong, but because you are weak.

Come, not because any goodness of your own gives you a right to come, but because you need mercy and help.

Come, because you love the Lord a little and would like to love him more.

Come, because he loved you and gave himself for you.

Come and meet the risen Christ, for we are his Body.

Perfectionism

We are constantly advised to be fitter, healthier, more grateful... Are you thinking that you are, quite frankly, good enough already?

You could be a better bread-maker, learn another language, work your way towards the lotus position, be more mindful. When is good enough, er, good enough? It is alarming to discover that Jesus said: "Be perfect" (Matthew 5:48). As with all Jesus' words, we need to wrestle with them to extract the meaning. Of course, he was speaking about morality, not bread-making, but is his way of being perfect different to ours?

In our culture, we are anxious about how we perform. Did I do that right? Was I punctual? Did I remember everything? Did I put the right hymnbook out? Did I avoid offending people?

Jesus frequently offended people with his forthright honesty. He was often late because he was busy dealing with someone who interrupted what he was doing. He praised truly embarrassing and 'inappropriate' behaviour when a woman dried his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36–50). Loving people always came first, and truth followed in its wake, as it inevitably does.

We are all influenced by our peers to a huge extent. We unconsciously absorb the norms of our times and the people we associate with. Our behaviour flows from accepting these norms. That is why we need to be "transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). It's a constant process.

So, we should start with the assumption that the norms are going to be wrong in some respects. The people around us will expect things of us that we should not provide (and vice versa). Yet when we concentrate on loving them, and ourselves, above everything else, we are welcoming in the kingdom of heaven.

"The people around us will expect things of us that we should not provide"

People change when they are loved. They thaw. I heard about a vicar who kept on caring about an annoying, intractable parishioner. His parish was raising money to renovate the church building. His persistent patience, valuing a dislikeable person,

eventually resulted in that individual coming to terms with changes being made and truly becoming part of the church that was being rebuilt.

I was thrown into a state of shock when I was diagnosed with cataracts. I was literally going blind. I blurted this out to my rector after the morning service. She responded with the most wonderful and unexpected words: "Can you come to lunch?" It had not been on her agenda. It gave me the time I needed to be heard and fed and encouraged by the kindness of others. I didn't care if I was given the wrong hymnbook that day. I didn't care if the sermon was wanting. I didn't care if the surplice wasn't ironed. It was all perfectly fine. ¶

Words: Ruth Hamilton-Jones
Photo: Shutterstock



The tree frog perfects the art of fitting in.



For more inspiration on living counter-culturally, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* by John Mark Comer pitches the spiritual case for a slower way of life.

How would you behave if you were God? Jesus was always surprising people by the way he lived. In this passage (Philippians 1:27–2:13), St Paul challenges us about how we should live if Jesus is our role model.

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

These verses are from the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Dwelling in the Word

Last September, Bishop Steven invited us all to focus on this passage from Philippians as we discern our future mission and ministry together. The Revd Canon Dr Peter Groves gives us his reflections on St Paul's radical message.

This is a truly extraordinary passage, one of the most influential in all Christian theology. Here we have Paul, formerly Saul, a Pharisee by his own admission, a pious and zealous child of the tribe of Benjamin, writing of a fellow Jew, a teacher and preacher whom he never met, one who was executed as a criminal only thirty years before. And Paul says, of the teacher he never met, that he was "in the form of God". You don't need to know much about history to realise how remarkable that statement is.

At the heart of Paul's message is his summary of Christ's mission. Although he was in the form of God, Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited", but rather "emptied himself". While our human desire is for status and reward, the Son of God shows us that the reality of love is different. He pours himself out, humbling himself in obedience, even to death on a cross. The love of Christ, the love which makes up the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, flows into creation, to transform and recreate the world of human pretence and pride. This, Christianity teaches, is what divinity is – an eternal act of self-giving, as if emptying an endless vessel of love into our hearts.

Just like the gospel writers, Paul shows us that the divinity of Christ means being identified with the last and not the first, the lowest and not the greatest in worldly terms. The boldest love is found in those whom the world calls poor, and the true riches of the gospel are felt when we know the need of those around us. So, as we strive to be a Christ-like church for the sake of God's world, we are called, as was the Philippian church, to have this example of self-emptying, to live lives worthy of the gospel, and to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus.

When we do so, when we give freely, give of ourselves in love to others, give of ourselves in prayer and worship to God, our own supply of love is not endless. The love we give is the love already given by God: we have received, and therefore can give. God empties himself endlessly to pour himself into our lives, to fill the space of our hearts with the truth that is *his* love. Let us give all that we can, of our means, of ourselves, of our lives. Let us take St Paul at his word, and truly have the mind of Christ. ¶



See *Pathways* online for more suggestions about how to Dwell in the Word: oxford.anglican.org/how-to-dwell-in-the-word You'll also find helpful suggestions about Dwelling in the Word with children, as they sustain and develop their Christian lives in this way as well.

Prayer for hope

God of hope, we are East of Eden,
we are captive in Egypt's foreign land,
we are wandering in the wilderness of Exodus,
we are in exile in Babylon,
we are in a desert time of trial and testing,
and we are in a passion time of abandonment and loss.

But you were with Noah and Abraham whispering foolish
futures,
you were with Moses painting horizons of freedom,
you were with Daniel anchoring deep to truth,
you were with Jesus willing strong surrender,
you were with Mary in torment of angel's promises and crisis of
the cross.

And so you are with us now,
as you were present then.
You have always been Immanuel,
And you are today.

Help us to bless you in Zechariah's song,
for the dawn from on high to break upon us.
Help us to magnify you with Mary's joy
for the promises made to our ancestors.
Help us to go in peace with Simeon and Anna's hope
to reveal your light to all the nations.
As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.
Amen

The future still holds many questions, and the uncertainty and worry can make us feel alone and isolated. Take a moment of quiet to say this prayer and remind yourself of God's promise to us all in Isaiah 41:10: "Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." ¶

Prayer: Charlie Kerr
Photo: Shutterstock



The songs in Isaiah 40–55 offer words of hope, strength and courage. Read Bishop Steven's reflections in his new book *Comfortable Words*.

brfonline.org.uk/comfortablewords

Someone at a festival told me...

Nour had heard people say that “Jesus died for her”. But that left her with one big question – why me? Finding the answer transformed her life. This is her story.

For me, it was never a question of whether God existed – the question was how to connect with God. I knew how to nourish my mind and how to nourish my body, but how about my spirit?

At a festival in London, I got talking to someone about Jesus. Coming from a Muslim background, I started bombarding him with a lot of questions about Jesus and his divinity, and why Jesus and the blood of Jesus and the crucifixion – and he was just answering effortlessly.

At the end, he gave me a copy of the New Testament. I read it through the week and, the next Sunday, I followed the sounds of the bells to St Laurence’s and asked, “When is the next Alpha course?” They answered, “It starts next week,” and the rest is history.

The most important question was *Why Jesus?* Did he really die, and why did he die for me? I kept hearing, “Jesus died for you, Jesus did that for you.” Why me? Who am I that Jesus would do anything like that for me?

It was a moment of transformation to realise the Bible I had in my hands was true. There are so many things in it that cannot stick together if it were modified. And the authority of the

message is around who are you and your identity. I personally believe that the biggest two questions anyone could ever answer are *Who am I?* and *What do I believe in?* After we talked about Jesus’ divinity, the crucifixion and the Holy Spirit, the penny just dropped. I knew exactly what I believed in. And it changed me. It changed me for good.

The difference is in where I am rooting my identity. Previously, I rooted my identity in what I do, what people think of me, what people say about me. But coming to faith, there is a much deeper, more prominent root for my identity – I am a child of God.

Everyone is accepted. Everyone is loved. There’s nothing you can do to earn God’s love – it’s given. It doesn’t matter where you come from, who you love or how you live your life. What really matters is who you are and where your identity is rooted in Jesus.

So many churches now have services online. Have a look, dip your toes in. What have you got to lose? ¶

Nour Shaker told her story to the Revd Mike Saunders as part of Come and See. Watch Nour’s interview, along with three others at oxford.anglican.org/come-and-see



Who told you? is our ongoing series of stories from Christians about coming to faith and the people who helped them along the way. Share your story with us: communications@oxford.anglican.org



St Frideswide Pilgrimage

Saturday 16 October 2021



A diocesan pilgrimage to your Cathedral

Join one of five guided walks from 1.5 to 9 miles long to Christ Church Cathedral in the heart of the city of Oxford. Refreshments in the Great Hall, prayer stations and reflection at the Shrine of St Frideswide.

Come on your own or bring a group. Booking essential.

Find out more at www.chch.ox.ac.uk/pilgrimage or call 01865 286165



DIocese of OXFORD
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes