



A free phonenumber of hymns,
reflections and prayers



CONNECTIONS

Text of reflections and prayers for Hymns We Love

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1. THINE BE THE GLORY!

Imagine the scene 2,000 years ago. Early on that first Easter Sunday morning, the followers of Jesus were devastated and hidden away, fearful of what lay ahead. All their hopes for a wonderful future seemed shattered because Jesus, their master and teacher from God, in whom they had put their faith and their hope, whom they had loved and followed, was now dead.

Early that morning, the disciples Peter & John were together when suddenly Mary Magdalene arrived shouting that someone had moved Jesus' body, but she didn't know where. Peter and John immediately ran to the tomb and there they found the folded grave clothes where the Jesus' body should have been. and although John believed something special had happened, Peter was just even more confused.

Certainly neither Mary, Peter nor John at this point could respond with the sense of victory and joy with which we have just sung, but over the coming hours their encounters with the risen Jesus took each of them on a journey from a place of utter despair and grief, to one of joy, filled with confidence, faith and hope for a future to be spent with the risen Jesus.

And this is journey that Edmond Budry, who wrote this wonderful, inspiring hymn, takes us on today. From the empty tomb with the rolled away stone and folded grave clothes, through Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the locked room where he scatters their fear and gloom - to his promise, as our Glorious Prince of Life, to bring us safe through Jordan to our home above - through the trials and challenges of life to an eternity safe by his side.

Edmond Budry was born in Vevey, in Switzerland in 1854. Vevey is a small, pretty town on the shores of Lake Geneva and has been home to Charlie Chaplin, the writer Graham Greene and actor James Mason, amongst many others. It was also here in the 1870's that a man named Henri Nestle helped to invent milk chocolate.

But whilst milk chocolate was being developed in his home town, Edmond Budry had moved away to nearby Lausanne to study theology, becoming a Free Church Pastor at the age of 27, before returning a few years later to Vevey where he remained a pastor until 1923, retiring 9 years before his death aged 78. He wrote and translated a number of hymns, but this is by far his most famous, which he wrote specifically to go with this wonderful rousing tune, composed by George Handel 140 years earlier.

Budry knew that the resurrection of Jesus is at the centre of the Christian faith, without it his belief would be meaningless. Saint Paul himself said *"if Christ did not rise from the dead... then our trust in God is worthless"* but equally, if Jesus did rise from the dead on that first Easter Morning, the implications are breathtaking and everything the Bible says about Jesus is true: God can be trusted, forgiveness is possible, death is defeated and heaven is attainable.

And that is why the reality of seeing and knowing a risen Jesus so transformed the lives of the disciples that morning and that's why we, and they, can sing so confidently

"Endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won"

But as we just reflected, the journey that day didn't start so confidently. Since the trauma of his public & agonising death on the previous Friday, everything now appeared lost to the followers of Jesus. Grieving, fearful and defeated they were not expecting a miracle and weren't ready for one. But Jesus came gently and personally to each of the them that day, meeting them at their point of need and turning their grief into joy, their fear into confidence and their defeat into victory.

Mary was the first to see Jesus. She had lingered outside the tomb when Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. We don't know why she stayed, perhaps she just wanted to be near the last place she had seen Jesus, but we do know that this is where Jesus comes to her, on her own, and gently speaks her name. *"Mary"*.

She immediately recognises his voice, turns towards him and cries out *"Teacher"*. It was not until Jesus speaks her name that Mary recognises him. But the moment he does she knows its him, because His voice is full of love for her. Sometimes seeing is not believing..... Loving is.

The disciples also needed to encounter Jesus that day.... and to see him. So, although Mary is sent by Jesus to tell them all that had just happened – the apostle to the apostles as she is often called – they all, including both Peter and John, seem to struggle to believe her story and so we find them that evening still fearful and hiding behind locked doors.

And this is where Jesus comes and stands among them. He doesn't tell them off for their lack of belief, or for not understanding all his teaching over the previous 3 years, he simply greets them *"Peace be with you"* and then he shows them his wounded hands and side.

Whilst Mary just needed to hear her name, the disciples needed to see Jesus, they needed him to show them his scars and to hear his voice. And Jesus meets them exactly where they were at.

They didn't need to leave their room, they didn't need to resolve their questions and fears, they didn't need to go to the temple or follow a religious programme. Instead Jesus came to them in their weakness and fear, just as they were.

And as they saw and experienced the risen Jesus, so their fear and despair disintegrated and were replaced with astonishment and delight. As we just sung:

"Lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom"

And what about you and I? I suspect that many of us may feel a bit like the disciples at the moment. For very different reasons we are also locked inside our houses, shut off from the world around us, possibly feeling lonely, isolated and fearful.

But the story of Easter assures us that the risen Jesus still wants to come to you and to me, to stand before us, to speak our name, to show us his love – through his scars from the cross - and to gently call us to believe and to follow.

He is not deterred by our questions or our doubts, he will meet us just where we are. We find a risen Jesus who is not afraid of our doubts or our fears, but who calls us by name, who shows, who explains, who welcomes and who forgives.

And if we place our trust in the risen Jesus, put our lives in his nail-scarred hands, he will scatter our fears and gloom, he will aid us in our strife and bring us safe through Jordan to our home above.....and then together we can proclaim.

"Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son, endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won"

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that no matter where I am today, you are able to find me, to come by my side and to call me by my name. Thank you that you are not put off by my doubts, anger, or fears but will always welcome me, just as I am.

Help me now to put my trust in you, knowing that being held in your arms is the safest place to be in this time of trouble.

I ask Lord that over the coming days you would help me draw close to you, listen to your voice and come to know just how much you love me.

In the name of Jesus, I pray.

Amen

2. HOW GREAT THOU ART

30 years ago, this April, the Hubble Space Telescope was launched with a mission to explore the furthest reaches of the universe. Immediately it began to change our view of the cosmos, capturing new stars and details that were impossible to see from earth.

However, no-one was prepared for what happened at the end of 1995. Over the Christmas holidays that year, the Institute director, Robert Williams, decided to use the 10-day break to point the telescope at a tiny, black, apparently empty, patch of sky no bigger than the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.

When the team returned after Christmas and looked at the images it had captured, they were astonished – there was no empty black patch of space, they found not one or two new stars, but hundreds and hundreds of galaxies, each one containing billions of stars.

As a result of this discovery astronomers are now confident that there are trillions of galaxies each one with billions of stars and that the universe is far bigger and more glorious than we ever could have imagined.

As Professor Jim Al-Khaili, the well-known theoretical physicist and broadcaster said *"it is impossible not to ... be intimidated by the extraordinary depth of the cosmos"*

Now Carl Boberg, who wrote today's wonderful hymn, didn't have the benefit of knowing all that the Hubble telescope has shown us, but he still knew how to find wonder in creation.

Carl was born the son of a carpenter in Sweden in 1859. He started out as a sailor, and you can imagine how at night, out on the northern seas, he might have looked up at the stars and wondered just how they came to be there.

After the sea, he went to bible school and later became a member of the Swedish parliament. He published many poems, hymns and songs but this is easily his most famous.

He saw a universe of beauty, power and wonder, and in that recognised the fingerprints of a beautiful, powerful and wonderful God... a God so great he could create trillions of stars with, as the Bible tells us, just the power of his Word.

But he also saw a God who was interested in the detail, the forest glades through which he wandered, the birds singing sweetly in the trees. A God who

not only knows every star, but lovingly created every tree, every leaf, who is so absorbed in the beauty and detail of life on earth, who finds joy in bird song just as we do.

But here's the funny thing – the bible tells us little about HOW these wonders we've been singing about were created - it deals with the creation of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars with just 10 words.

“in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and then adds the throwaway line *“and he also made the stars...”*

You may have read the Bible, or you may not even own one. Either way it's clear that those who wrote it are not really very interested in the how's of creation... that's what science is for, and the Bible was never meant to be a science textbook.

Instead the Bible is much more interested in the who and the why - Who is this creator God? What is His character like? Why did he make us?

Maybe you can remember some of the Old Testament bible stories like Adam and Eve, Joseph and that dreamcoat of his, Moses and the Exodus or the ten commandments.

Well I would suggest that when you put all of the stories together, they can be summarised as saying just two things:

Firstly, they help us understand just how big, how powerful, but also how Holy the God who created the stars is....

But secondly, they then reassure us that this great awesome God, actually loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Let's just think about the first theme for a moment. In one sense it's obvious... if there really is a Creator God, He has to be utterly different from us – this is part of the meaning of the term *“Holy”* which literally means *“set apart”*.

The book of Isaiah says:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” declares the Lord, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”

Again, if we think about it, this makes sense, because if God wasn't holy, set-apart, perfect, then he wouldn't really be God!

Let's imagine for the moment you and I are standing in New York, looking at the Empire State Building, and on the side of it someone has painted a scale from bottom to top where they have ranked every human who has ever lived in terms of how well they lived (how good they were).

Now, if you were doing that, who would you put at the top? Maybe Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela? ...and at the bottom? perhaps Hitler or Stalin

And with that as the range, where do you think you fit in? Somewhere near the top? Or maybe a bit lower.

Finally, having done all that, where should God be on the scale? Well, I guess He has to be above even the 'best' human, so maybe at cloud level, or maybe the moon. Well the bible tells us he is far beyond that, infinitely further than even the Hubble telescope can see.

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways"

God isn't just a slightly better version of humans. The truth is that the whole range from the very worst of humanity to very best doesn't even register on the scale of God's goodness.

The gap is so big, there is no way you or I, by our own efforts, can ever close it. We are human, and, as one of our poets said, 'to be human is to err'. Even those whose lives we most admire will acknowledge their own selfishness, or in Bible terms that old fashioned word "sin".

It might not be that popular – for all sorts of reasons. But our difference from God isn't simply about scale – it's about our goodness. And actually, I have never met a human being who – when being honest and candid – won't admit that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

So many wars, so much environmental calamity, the recent economic crashes, our relationship and family difficulties – all these have, at their root and cause, an element of human selfishness be they individual or collective. And we have proved ourselves incapable of ridding ourselves of it.

Now, if we were to stop there that would be bad news. But there is good news... God never stops there.

Those Old Testament Stories of Abraham, of Moses, of David are all about God finding a group of people to get to know him and for God to teach about who he was and how he loved them, so they could pass it onto others.

Now if you do read your way through all of the old testament, you will find out that they were not always very good at that, and time after time they go wrong and lose the plot. But you and they are never out of God's reach.

God didn't mess up choosing them, because despite all of their failings, God kept loving and longing for relationship and wouldn't be persuaded otherwise and so he comes himself in Jesus.

And coming back to today's hymn, Carl Boberg saw the same link as he moves seamlessly from the wonders of creation in verse 2 to the story of Jesus and the cross in verse 3. 'and when I think that God his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in....'

And that is the wonderful story of God's love for you and me that we remember every Easter and which we will explore a little bit more tomorrow when we will sing Rock of Ages.

But first let's sing again about the wonders of creation, the wonders of a holy God who loves you and me and together proclaim "My God, How Great Thou Art!"

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that you are a powerful, great God who created the entire universe and trillions of stars with just the power of your word.

Thank you also that you love the beauty and detail of life, taking joy in peaceful forest glades and exquisite bird song as well as in the splendour of the lofty mountains.

Thank you that most of all you find joy and love in your relationship with us, your people.

Help me to know your love, to experience your joy and to see the world around me, and people around me, as you do.

As I listen to the Hymns We Love series this week, please help me to take a step closer to you each day to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day.

Amen

3. ROCK OF AGES

If you search for “Rock of Ages” on a computer the first thing that comes up is, not the hymn we just sang, but the 2012 musical starring Tom Cruise. Its strapline promises “*Nothin’ but a good time*”.

That is probably not the first phrase that comes to mind when thinking about this hymn. It is a big, weighty hymn – in fact it can feel a bit serious and downbeat, but I hope as we look at it today, we will come to see that it actually shows something amazing about God’s character.

In many ways it is not dissimilar to its writer. Augustus Toplady, was a complex individual and not easy to get to know.

He was gentle, humble, caring, loved by his parishioners but also a bit of a loner who became embroiled in a bitter theological dispute, which for many years tainted his reputation.

Born in Farnham in 1740, his father was a major in the Royal Marines, but tragically died just 5 months after Augustus was born. Augustus grew up an only child and formed a pretty solitary figure for much of his short life, dying when he was just 38.

He found faith as a teenager, was ordained and initially served as a curate in Blagdon, Somerset, close to Cheddar Gorge. And, if you believe the sign painted on the rocks in nearby Burrington Combe, it was here, as he sheltered from a violent storm, that the inspiration for Rock of Ages came to him and he quickly scribbled the words down on the back of a playing card.

It’s a wonderful, romantic story, but sadly untrue! – in fact his inspiration was a verse from the book of Isaiah “*Trust in the Lord forever, For the Lord our Lord is a Rock of Ages*”

Yesterday, we immersed ourselves in the celebrated hymn “*How Great Thou Art*” and explored God as the Creator of an amazing, complex and vast universe discovering how his greatness and goodness are precisely what makes him worthy of praise. But even more wonderfully that he had sent Jesus to live with us, die for us on the cross, and rise from the tomb on that first Easter Sunday for our salvation.

And it is the cross that is at the centre of this hymn and what we will look at today. But before we do that, let’s just consider for a moment who this Jesus was and what we can know about him?

Well the first thing is, there can be no doubt that he was real. There really was a man, called Jesus, who lived 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away from here, who claimed to be a prophet and who was executed & died on a cross under the Romans. The evidence for this is overwhelming, not just from Christians, but also from Jewish and Roman writers and records at the time.

So, the question we need to ask ourselves, is not whether he existed ... but who he actually was.....

If you ask many people in this country who Jesus was, they will probably say he was a good man, a moral teacher who taught about love and how to live a good life.

And they are absolutely right.... to a point, because if we look carefully at what Jesus said about himself, I don't think he ever intended us to draw that conclusion.

He is someone who said, "*I am the light of the world*", "*I am the resurrection*" "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" he wasn't claiming to be a signpost but to BE the way, not simply to offer a perspective on truth but to BE the truth.

The other thing about Jesus is that for all his teachings and for all the quality of his life, his primary focus, and the focus of the new testament and of Christians down the ages has not been so much on his life, but on his suffering, death and resurrection.

Have you ever thought what an odd symbol the cross is? We wear it round our necks, it is the shape of most churches, many people make the sign of it when they pray.

But if I was talking to you today wearing a guillotine or a model electric chair round my neck, you would rightly think I'm rather odd... and yet we think nothing of wearing a symbol of probably the most brutal and cruel form of execution ever invented.

So why do Christians focus so much on the cross? Why are almost 1/3 of the gospels – the accounts of Jesus' life - about his death? The answer is that Christians believe it is through, and only through, Jesus death, and his subsequent resurrection, that relationship with God can be restored.

It is at the Cross where Christianity is shown to be different to every other religion. God comes and makes the human condition his own, taking all the consequences of it on to himself. Dying so we can live, suffering alone so we never have to and taking our judgment so we can be free.

Christianity confronts straight on the seriousness of sin. It shows it is impossible to overstate the consequences of that in terms of our relationship with a holy God, with each other and with his world and it makes clear that humans cannot solve that problem by themselves.

It was Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century who said "Only man SHOULD pay for his sins, since it was he who was in default, Only God COULD make this payment, since it was he who demanded it"

And it's this that Augustus Toplady makes so clear in our hymn today.

Not the labour of my hands Can fulfil Thy law's demands;

No matter how hard we try, we can never meet God's standards, we can't ever be good enough or do enough - that Gap is just too big

Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow,

Also it doesn't matter how hard we try, how good our intentions are or how sorry we are

All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone

in the end Toplady says that everything has to come from God, only God can rescue us.

And so, he concludes that we are utterly helpless before God

*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling
Naked come to you for dress, helpless look to you for grace
Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me saviour or I die.*

Does this all sound somewhat downbeat? I certainly think many people assume this hymn is rather depressing ... but I don't think this is what Toplady thought

You see whilst at the cross I cannot escape my emptiness, NEITHER can I escape that God loved me and you so much that he paid the ultimate price to bring us back into relationship with him.

On one level the cross shows us to be helpless, naked and lost, but within this Jesus death reveals that you and I are, in fact, PRICELESS because God did everything, He gave it all, paying the highest price to redeem us, to buy us back, to rescue us.

And this is the unimaginable value that God places on you and I.

And isn't that wonderful? If we were involved in our own salvation we could never really be sure if we were good enough or had done enough.

I can't even keep to the speed limit. If I had to rely on myself to be good enough for God I would be on pretty shaky ground

Instead, the rescue plan has been completely finished by Jesus and is Rock solid. God is our Rock of Ages - all we need to do is say "thank you" and accept the most wonderful gift

This is what Augustus Toplady did – and he found in Christ one who – whatever the storms of life – offered him an unchanging, utterly faithful and true saviour. No wonder he wanted to hide himself in this God. So, let's listen again and sing along to Rock of Ages, reflecting on the wonderful love that drove God's rescue plan for you and me.

Closing Prayer

The theologian Emil Bruner wrote that the Cross is the only place where the loving, forgiving, merciful, God is revealed in such a way that we see, that his holiness, and his love, are both equally infinite.

Dear God

Thank you that you chose to pour out your love for me. That through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, you pick me up, wash me clean and make me whole.

Thank you, Lord that all of this was done by Jesus and none of it depends on how good, or how bad, I have been. You love me regardless, and I am priceless in your eyes.

Help me now, to know and accept your kind and wonderful gift of forgiveness.

In the name of Jesus, I pray.

Amen

4. AMAZING GRACE

According to Jerry Bailey, of Broadcast Music, Amazing Grace “*may be the most recorded song on the planet*”. It has been recorded nearly 7,000 times by people as diverse as Elvis Presley, Aretha Franklin, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and even the Lemonheads!!

But what is it about this hymn, written nearly 250 years ago by a Buckinghamshire clergyman called John Newton, that makes it so popular today?

Maybe it's because it speaks so simply and eloquently about a life turned around and a hope still to come. It tells us that Jesus was not just saving us FROM something but was saving us FOR something.

And perhaps the best way to explore what this could be is to have a look at one of Jesus best known stories - the parable of the Prodigal son.

It's the story of a rich man who had two sons, and one day the younger one comes to his father & asks for all his inheritance, half of everything the father owns. His father gives it to him but instead of using it sensibly the son runs off and squanders the whole lot on wild living.

Eventually the money runs out and he goes through a terrible time ending up completely destitute and starving.

Jesus tells that at this low point he finally comes to his senses and realises that even his father's servants are better off than him, and though he has blown his chance as a son, perhaps he could go back and work for his father as a servant, then at least he would be fed and have a place to sleep.

So, he heads off home. And this is how Jesus describes what happens next in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.’

But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get the best heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here — given up for dead and now

alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time."

You see, the father wasn't in the slightest bit interested in just rescuing his son from the mess he was in.... he wanted FAR MORE; he loved his son so much that he wanted to totally restore him to the place he was before it all went wrong.

That's why he put the family ring of authority on his finger and that's why they had such a huge party....

And THAT is what Grace is. It is free, extravagant, and costly to the giver.

God doesn't want to just rescue us from our mess, he wants to share his riches with us, to restore us to our place as his children with all that that entails.

And John Newton, who wrote today's hymn, really understood what it meant to be taken on that journey by God, as I think it fair to say, that he tested the story of the prodigal son to its extreme.

The son of a merchant navy captain, John's mother died when he was 7 and understandably maybe, he became very unruly. He was sacked from his first job and at 19 was press ganged into the navy. He deserted, was caught, flogged and eventually began working on the slave ships taking captured slaves from Africa to the Caribbean to be sold as property.

Here his behaviour grew even worse, he beat people, raped women and behaved utterly appallingly. He ended up reduced to rags, put in chains and begging for food.

He was eventually rescued and was heading back to England by ship when he encountered a massive storm. The ship he was travelling in was badly damaged and close to sinking.

As Newton struggled at the wheel of the ship, expecting to die, his mind turned to his childhood and the stories of God he'd heard from his mother and for the first time in his life he wondered if those stories might actually be true.

Well the ship survived the night and incredibly a further 4 weeks at sea, eventually drifting into Ireland with all supplies gone. Newton was convinced that it was only God who had saved him and there and then vowed to follow God for the rest of his life.

But things were not that straight forward. Though he tried hard to become a better person, to read his bible and even stop swearing, he continued to work

in the slave trade and on his very next trip to Sierra Leone, quickly fell back into the absolute worst of all his old ways, seemingly powerless to stop himself.

He then caught a terrible fever and as he lay sick, despair utterly overwhelmed him. He realised he was even worse than the prodigal son because he had his chance to return and had thrown it away, he had effectively rejected God twice, so surely there was no way back for him now.

He ended up crawling to a remote corner of the island he was staying on and there in his own words "*cast himself before his Lord, who should do with him as he pleased*"

He had reached such a low that he no longer cared what happened to him, all he could do was throw himself on God's mercy without even much hope of an answer.

There was no sudden flash of light, but afterwards he was always clear that this was the point where everything changed. He recovered his strength, returned to England, got married and began to rebuild his life.

Just 8 years later he applied to become an Anglican priest, but not surprisingly it took a further 7 years before he was actually accepted!

But he did eventually become vicar of Olney in Buckinghamshire where he set up a regular Thursday evening prayer service. It was his habit to write a weekly hymn for this and so it was in 1772 no doubt reflecting on the journey of his life that he wrote the hymn Amazing Grace.

To finish his story, he had by this point realised the evils of the slave trade and joined the anti-slavery campaign, working with and supporting William Wilberforce and then finally, just 9 months before he died in 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed.

You can therefore see that when he wrote "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me*" he really knew what he was talking about. He knew what God had rescued him FROM and could also see what God had rescued him FOR.

He could see that it was God's grace, God's endless love and forgiveness that kept him safe through many dangers, toils and snares.

But he also could see that God had gone so much further than just rescuing him, so much further than only forgiving him, he had completely restored him to the place he was always meant to be: close to God, bright shining as the sun, in full and loving relationship.... And this is Amazing Grace.

Just like the father in the story of the prodigal son, God had not only shown him mercy, he had lavished him with Grace.

God's grace is extravagant, it is illogical, it is underserved, it is unnecessary..... but it is also utterly wonderful.

And that is grace. And when we recognise how undeserved it is, and how beautiful and strong it is, it leaves us amazed. No wonder this hymn is loved by so many people...

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that no matter how far I wander, you will always be there waiting, like the father in the story of the prodigal son, ready to run towards me with your arms open wide, to pick me up, hug me and welcome me back to be at your side.

Thank you that the life of John Newton shows how this is true even for those of us who feel so undeserving.

Lord, maybe for the first or for the thousandth time, I turn to you now and say I am sorry for all that I have done wrong, please forgive me, wash me clean and take me back into your arms.

I ask this in the name of Jesus and in confidence that you hear me and love me.

Amen

5. THE LORD'S MY SHEPHERD

If you have been listening to our series on Hymns We Love, you will know that yesterday we looked at Amazing Grace and saw how God lavishes us with his extraordinary love, grace, and hope, giving us so much more than we could ever deserve and so much more than we could have ever dreamed of.

However, if we are honest, there are times in all our lives, and never more so than in this current crisis, when we may not feel “*very lavished*” when love, hope and grace feel a long, long way away.

For every one of us there will be times in our journey through life that are difficult and full of pain, and ever more so as we get older: Failing health, loneliness and isolation, the death of friends and loved ones, the fear of own death and future. These are all very real challenges that we will face at some point.

And for 3,000 years in such times of struggle, people have turned to Psalm 23, for comfort, guidance and support.

The hymn we've just listened to is actually just a 17th Century translation of the original Hebrew scriptures. The Psalm itself was written by King David of Israel, about 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

David was the greatest King Israel ever had, he was powerful, victorious in battle and loved by his people. He was the 25x great grandfather of Joseph, the father of Jesus and, as well as being king, was a significant spiritual leader.

But David wasn't always a sophisticated, handsome, psalm writing king - he started life as Shepherd boy, looking after his father's sheep. And this psalm draws on all his experience as a shepherd following the journey through a year in the life of a shepherd and his sheep.

It starts at home, where the sheep can relax in green pastures, feeding beside still waters, where every need is carefully supplied, and the sheep are safe and well fed.

But as the summer heat comes, the grass withers and streams dry out, so the shepherd needs to lead his sheep up into the mountains to the high pastures, where the grass is better.

And the journey there, through the dark valleys, up the mountainsides can be hazardous with wolves, bears and lions to fend off.

But when the sheep get to the high plateaus or table lands as they are called, they will find the shepherd has already prepared the grass for them, and it will

sustain them through the hot summer, while the shepherd will protect them from predators with his rod and staff.

Then, once summer turns to autumn, the shepherd will lead his sheep back home for the winter months and back to safety.

And in the same way God, our Good Shepherd, looks after us....

Let's notice 3 things

Firstly, the good shepherd daily cares for and protects his sheep.

Secondly, the good shepherd travels every step of the journey with his sheep

And finally, the good shepherd leads his sheep back to his home where they are safe and looked after for ever.

The book of Isaiah says “[God] *tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart*”

This is exactly the picture of daily love and care that David sees as he writes this psalm.

God is his Shepherd and He is our shepherd. He created and redeemed you and I. He loves us as his own, just like the shepherd owns and cares for his sheep.

But just as God is like the shepherd, so we are like sheep & often in need of some shepherding!

Of all domesticated animals, sheep are the least able to look after themselves. They have no defence against predators, they cannot find their own food, they are susceptible to endless bugs and infections. They can't even shed their own fur without the help of the shepherd. They are also known for making some very poor decisions that leave them in trouble.

It is not that uncommon for example, for a slightly overweight sheep to find a nice comfy hollow to lie in. But as it snuggles down, its centre of gravity can move and suddenly none of its feet are touching the ground. It's then stuck. Shepherd's refer to this as the sheep being cast, stuck on its back with its legs waving in the air and unable to get up....

Now, whilst this might appear funny to us, it can be rather serious for the sheep... without getting too biological, gasses can build up in its stomach, the

blood supply is cut off from its legs and it rapidly gets weaker and weaker. If left alone it will die.

But if a shepherd finds a cast down sheep, he can't just put it upright and walk away. He must turn it gently, rubbing its legs to bring the blood supply back and rubbing its stomach to let the gases go down and then support it until it is steady enough to walk by itself.

I think this is a wonderful picture of how God, our Shepherd, cares for us.

Like sheep, we will often look for the comfy hollow to settle in, choosing the easy life, rather than following the shepherd.

We can get distracted and lost down the cul-de-sacs of life... but God is the wonderful shepherd who daily comes and picks us up, puts us gently on our feet, and returns us to his flock. As the psalm says, He restores our soul.

As we know, life is a journey and there will be times when things are not easy - we find ourselves in a dark place, where we can't see where we are going and where we are afraid. And here the psalm promises us that God is by our side journeying with us.

To get to the better pastures the Shepherd can't take the sheep along the ridges because the ground is too steep. Instead he must take them up the narrow, deep and dark valleys.

BUT in these valleys the sheep can't see where they are going, it is dark, there are predators, so they have no choice but trust to the wisdom and protection of their shepherd.

In the same way David promises that God will be there to lead us through the dark times when we cannot see where we are going or what may be coming up from behind.

David does not say he walks IN the valley of shadow of death but THROUGH it. The sheep go through the valleys either on their way to the fresh grass of the high plateaus, or on their way back home.

Like them, we will never stay permanently in the valleys, God will lead us out - either to a better place here, or to our ultimate home, but either way he promises to always walk with us.

The other thing you may notice when you look at the psalm and hymn, is that it starts in the third person, *"The Lord is my Shepherd" "He makes me lie down" "He leads me", "he guides me"* but as soon as we have passed through the valleys the psalm turns to first person *"you are with me" "your rod comforts me" "you anoint my head"*.

God never promises to insulate us from the hard times in life, but he does promise to be with us through them. and if we stick with him through these times then our relationship with him will deepen and strengthen.

Finally, David promises that God will lead us home. *"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"*

Ultimately our journey through life will end. Whatever green pastures or dark valleys we are travelling through will finish and there God promises to be with us and to take us safely home.

In saving us on the Cross, Jesus didn't just save us for a better life here and now, but for an eternity with God.

Now picturing what that might be like is not easy. The thought of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for ever doesn't fill most of us with joy.

So, what can we actually know about eternity?

Well we know it will be physical and not so dissimilar to what is around us now. The bible talks about a new earth, one like this one but perfect. It will therefore be much the same as living on earth, but also totally different, with no pain, no death, no tears.

CS Lewis expresses it brilliantly. At the end of *The Last Battle*, the finale of his Narnia books, that world is drawn to an end and as they look forward to what happens next CS Lewis says this:

"And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

As we each head towards life with God forever we can know and trust that our Good Shepherd will be there with us and will lead us safely to his home. So put your life in his hands again and trust his love. He has promised to protect us every step of the way, no matter how easy or how dark the valley, he will be with us for ever and our hope will never fail.

Closing Prayer

In the book of Romans, Chapter 8, Saint Paul says this:-

"I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are MY good shepherd, that you are by my side through the best times but also through the darkest of valleys, when life feels too hard, you promise never to leave me.

And now, in the midst of this coronavirus, please draw close. Lead me, protect me, care for me and sustain me. I trust that you will lead me through these dark and uncertain times and will be by my side, whatever happens, for now and for ever more.

In Jesus name.

Amen

6. AND CAN IT BE?

Today we reach the end of our short journey looking at the Christian faith through some of our most loved hymns.

Don't worry if you've not been with us for the whole week, these sessions will be repeated again next week so please feel free to call back then.

Our hymn today is an answer to the question what does it actually mean to follow and trust this God? How do we respond to a God who is, on the one hand, the Holy Creator of the universe, and on the other our very personal rescuer and redeemer? A God of power and might, who also lavishes us with grace and love and longs to guide and comfort us through every step of our journey through life?

Well, I think in answering this we can learn a lot from today's hymn and its writer.

And Can it be! was written by Charles Wesley in 1738. Charles, and his older brother John, are best known as the founders of the Methodist church and the leaders of what is now known as the Great Awakening, a huge revival of Christianity in the mid 17 hundreds.

John Wesley was the more famous as a preacher, but it was Charles who wrote the hymns. And boy did he write hymns, around 6,500 in total, that's 2 ½ a week, every week for 50 years. Week in, week out with no breaks!

But his parents were also not lacking in energy ... Charles was the 18th of 19 children produced by Susanna and Samuel Wesley. And rather than be totally exhausted by this achievement, they still found time for Samuel to be a parish priest, writer and poet and for Susanna to teach all their children at home so proficiently that by the time they were 11 they were virtually fluent in both Latin and Greek and also knew large sections of the New Testament by heart.

Frankly, I really don't know what I've been doing for most of my life to have achieved so little in comparison!

But this work ethic was then reflected in the way Charles and John went about their Christian lives.

At university Charles set up what became known as the Holy Club. It was a group of students who were almost fanatical in their pursuit of living a devout Christian life. They met for 3 hours every day for prayer and study and still made sure they made time to pray outside of this in every single hour they were awake.

They were earnest and honourable but fell into the age-old mistake of thinking their behaviour could earn and improve their salvation. They were so rigid that people mocked them for following such strict, unbending methods, and so soon they began to be called - Methodists - a term which stuck with them for their rest of their lives.

However, Charles knew that for all the outward piety, something was still missing internally. For all his efforts he hadn't earned his way to a closer relationship with God. Something was missing.

And so it was on 21 May 1738 in London, at the house of a man called John Bray, that Charles Wesley suddenly understood and then encountered the grace of God and the love, forgiveness and joy that followed from just giving in and letting God take over.

3 days later his brother John experienced the same, and the impact of this changed the whole of Britain.

And if we want to know how Charles felt about this, then today's hymn tells it all, written just after this experience it shows how his black and white world of duty and obligation has been transformed into the technicolour of relationship and love, and that's why he can say. *"My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee"*

So, what about you and me? Can we say those words with the same conviction as Charles, how do we respond to all that God has done for us?

Should we, like the younger Charles Wesley try to earn God's acceptance through religious observance?

Or should we follow the Charles Wesley of today's hymn, and simply receive the gift held out to us by God. Accepting that we don't have to DO anything to earn God's love, because everything has already been DONE by Jesus.

3 days ago, we briefly reflected how Christianity is different from any other religion, because it gives us no role in our own salvation other than to say *"thank you"*.

But I think, if we are honest, even if we agree with that in principle, in today's culture it can be hard for us to completely embrace. We are so engrained with a strong work ethic... we have to earn money, earn respect, earn the chance to retire, that we can be suspicious of something given for free with no strings attached... and like the early Charles Wesley we then bring this thinking in to our approach to God.

The sad fact is, that if you ask most people, perhaps even those within the church, what Christianity is about, they will say it is about being good; going to church on Sundays, singing the right hymns, being kind to people, living a good life.

Or, if they are more cynical, they may say it is about being a goody-goody, a spoilsport – frowning on fun, judging others and arrogantly criticising everyone else's behaviour.

Both are so far from the truth because they place us, not Jesus, at the centre of our own salvation. They are at risk of turning our relationship with God into a sort of contract: He's done his bit in sending Jesus to die for us, now we just need to do our bit by being good if we are going to keep the prize.

But the Christian faith is the exact opposite. It is not about what we can DO for God, it is all about what God has DONE for us.

Now of course that doesn't mean how we behave doesn't matter. Jesus talked a lot about how we should behave, how to lead a good life, what standards we should aim for.

BUT the motivation for this is so different. God is not pushing us into a certain level of behaviour through fear or guilt, rather our behaviour is simply a response to the love and grace we have received.

As is often the case, Shakespeare has a wonderful analogy. In the play *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Anthony describes his love for Egypt like this. He says "*My heart was to thy rudder tied by th'strings*".

For a Christian the desire to live a good life is not about being pushed by fear but being pulled by love, as if our hearts were tied by string to God, so that wherever He leads, our heart follows.

And isn't this so much better? The way of grace says everything has already been done by Jesus on the cross, there is nothing you or I can do to make it any better.

BUT the wonderful, good news of Christianity is that all you and I need to do is rely on Jesus. And with him we can be 100% sure, because he will never let us down.

It is Jesus who has made us good enough, the father has adopted us, we have become his children and that is why Charles Wesley could end his hymn so positively and confidently:

“No condemnation now I dread....[I'm] clothed in righteousness Divine, Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown, through Christ my own”

Because of what Jesus has done you and I can approach God with confidence.

Confident not in ourselves or what we've done but confident in God and what he has done

Confident that if we give him our life it will be safe in his hands both now and for eternity.

Closing Prayer

Maybe, having listened to Hymns We Love, you feel you would like to turn afresh to God and place your life safely in His hands.

If you would like to do that, for the first or even the thousandth time – (Pope Francis talks about us receiving the love of Christ afresh every day) - you can be confident that God is listening, that he will forgive and that your life will be safe in his hands both now and for eternity.

And if you would like to do that, please feel free to pray the following prayer; I will pause after each line so you can repeat it yourself, if and only if, you would like to do so:

My Lord and my God

Thank you that you made me, and you love me.

Thank you that this love and acceptance isn't based on my goodness but on the goodness of Jesus.

I ask for your forgiveness for the times I have lived away from your ways.

Thank you for the love that you have shown me in Jesus.

Today I want to receive that in a fresh way.

Thank you for your amazing gift of eternal life.

I give my life to you and would love you to be my Lord.

Please come and live your life in me by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Thank you.

These things I pray in Jesus' Name.

Amen

7. WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS

According to a recent survey more than half of the UK population pray, which is perhaps a little surprising given that this is nearly double the number of people who say they believe in God. This suggests that even those of us who have no belief, or are unsure of what we believe, still look for some comfort in prayer. According to leading researcher, the number of internet searches for prayer have skyrocketed since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

It therefore appears that there is some level of basic human need to turn to something beyond ourselves in times of crisis for comfort, hope and maybe even solutions.

That is certainly what Joseph Scriven, who wrote this wonderful hymn in 1855 believed. But when he prayed he wasn't praying to a vague, unknown, distant God, he knew exactly who he was talking to: his friend Jesus, a friend so faithful that he could carry all of Joseph's pain and grief and burdens and then take him in his arms to find solace and comfort.

Joseph knew this to be true, because when he wrote this hymn although he had already suffered much grief and sadness he had also experienced something even more profound – the friendship and care of Jesus.

Born in Ireland in 1820, as Joseph graduated from Trinity College Dublin the world must have appeared rosy, he was in love and ready to marry. But on the day before the planned wedding, his fiancée saddled a horse to come and see him, but just when they saw each other as she was crossing a bridge, the horse bucked and threw her into the river below. By the time Joseph reached her, she was already dead.

Heartbroken he emigrated to Canada but eventually fell in love again. He became engaged to marry Eliza, but sadly she fell ill and after 3 years of suffering, and multiple postponements of their wedding, she too died. Crushed by this Joseph never fell in love again and struggled for much of his remaining life with depression.

And yet in his grief and despair he found deep consolation in prayer.

He wrote this hymn as a poem to comfort his concerned mother back in Ireland and it was only many years later that a friend found it in a drawer at Joseph's house and was deeply moved. And so, it was set to music and has become one of our most loved hymns and such an encouragement to millions of people to bring their grief, their trials, their temptations to Jesus in the privilege of prayer.

The heart of Christianity is our loving relationship with God and at the heart of any relationship is communication, both speaking and listening, and the heart of our communication with God is prayer.

There are many definitions of what prayer is, but one I particularly like is that when you pray, you should open yourself up in such a way that sometime – perhaps not today, but at some point – you will be able to hear God say to you “*I Love you*”.

Now I appreciate that may sound rather vague but in essence that is what a loving relationship is all about and, if we are honest, what all of us most want to hear and know – that we are loved and in particular that we are loved by God.

But what does that mean in practice, how do we pray, what should we expect when we pray? How does God answer our prayer? These are all really, really important questions and worthy of proper discussion and there are many books you can read that will help explore these, but today in the few minutes available to us I just want to look at a few pointers based on what Joseph Scriven has suggested in this wonderful hymn.

The starting point is always that God knows us and despite knowing everything STILL loves us. And because this is beyond question, we don't need to be timid but can approach him with confidence as his very special son or daughter.

Jesus himself said that when we pray we should call God “*Abba*”, which literally means “*Daddy*”. Therefore, we don't need special words, a special formal voice or to be in a special place to talk to him. God just wants us to approach him as ourselves even with our funny ways, accents or words. We just need to be honest, natural and real.

And in being yourself, don't be afraid to express your feelings. Joseph encourages us to carry EVERYTHING to God in prayer, and he reminds us that even though Jesus knows our every weakness we should still take it to the Lord in prayer.

This means when we pray we can lift up whatever is concerning us at that moment... if we are fearful we can be afraid before him, if bored, we should lift up our boredom, if tired, our tiredness. If our minds are full of foolish fantasies, if we are feeling selfish, or angry, even if we are angry with God Himself, then we need not be afraid to let Him see what is going on in our hearts and minds. It's not as if he doesn't know it all already!

Jesus told us to come like little children to God, and one thing we all know is that little children don't tend to hide their feelings. I know God is more than capable of dealing with our emotions, he just wants us to be transparent and talk to him honestly.

And so, with all these things we can take them to Lord in prayer, and then ask to leave them with Him. He has big arms and whatever we throw at Him, he will catch. Whatever we leave at his feet he will take from us.

And I think that is particularly important at the moment when so many of us are fearful and anxious, sick or even grieving. We can take all of this to God and please be assured that God loves you and longs for you to talk to him however that comes out.

But sometimes it can be so hard it is difficult to put these things into words, sometimes all we can say is "help". Or do little more than just groan. And if that's the case then that too is fine. It is enough.. God knows and hears.

But I'm aware that many of us will also find comfort in more formal written prayers, and that too is wonderful - they can be really helpful when we don't quite know what to say, or when their words are familiar and comforting and we know they can help us approach God.

They provide structure and support. They can also help remind us to pray for others and not just ourselves. They can teach us about who God is and what His character is like as they will often be based on scripture.

If you find them helpful I would encourage you to find books of prayers or press option 6 on this Daily Hope phone line to join us in the Church of England's morning and evening prayers.

However, I would encourage you to not limit yourself to formal prayers, but also try to talk to God in your own voice and with your own words.

The other important part of communication is listening, to create space in our day and in our prayers to just be quiet, to see what God might want to say to you. To let him work through your thoughts and your imagination to guide you, prod you, encourage you and say, "I love you".

But whatever you do the one thing we should always try to do..... is to just show up! Like all relationships, the more we invest, the closer we get. We need to persevere and to communicate with God regularly.

For all of us there will be times when prayer comes easily, maybe in times of crisis, maybe in time of happiness and thankfulness but there will also be times when it's just plain hard work, when it feels we are just talking to the ceiling, when God feels a million miles away. This is true for everyone; all of the great Christians tell of times in their lives when prayer just proved hard work. But those same people will also say the important thing was just to persevere and keep going, to cling on to the truth that, although you don't feel it, your relationship with God hasn't changed, He still loves you, He still hears you and He still delights in you coming to Him every day.

And I believe this is what Joseph Scriven found, he is honest in this hymn that he could be weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care, feeling lost and alone.

But he also knew that this was not the end, no matter what this world throws at us Jesus has promised that there is an eternal future that is real and assured and that there, in heaven, there will no longer be any struggles to pray, because there we shall see God face to face

All that will remain is love and relationship and that is why building that relationship now through prayer will protect, guide and support us every step of the journey through life and then for ever more.

So, let's now sing again... what a friend we have in Jesus! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

Closing Prayer

Dear Abba Father

Thank you for the incredible honour and privilege to be able to carry all my hopes, fears and questions to you in prayer.

Thank you that I can come just as I am, with all my imperfections. That no matter where I am emotionally or spiritually, you are constant - you always love, you always listen, and you always delight in my prayers.

Please help me to prioritise spending time with you: to talk and to listen. Help me to persevere and to keep showing up!

And I ask Lord that through our times together in prayer, my love for you will grow and I will know and experience the reality of your love for me.

In the name of Jesus, I pray

Amen

8. LORD, FOR THE YEARS

Lord for the Years is the newest of all the hymns we are enjoying in Hymns We Love. It was written in 1969 by Timothy Dudley-Smith, who is one of our most prodigious modern hymnwriters. He has written around 400 hymns including the very well known "*Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord*" and was even awarded an OBE in 2003 for services to Hymnody, which is word I suspect not many of use every day!!

Prior to that he was a clergy man and served as Bishop of Thetford until his retirement in 1992. He currently lives in Cambridge.

In this rousing and uplifting hymn, he starts by thanking God for all that he has done for us – for His love, His forgiveness and in verse 2 all that God has given us through his word, the Bible. And then, from this secure base, the rest of the hymn is a prayer, firstly for our land, then our world and finally for ourselves.

And today I would like to focus on what Timothy Dudley-Smith believes is central to all the good things God has given us, and that is his word: The Bible.

According to the BBC there has recently been a massive surge in book sales as readers seek both escapism and education during this time of crisis. A review of the best seller lists reveals a mix of novels, children's books and self-help manuals.

However, there is one book that never appears in the best seller charts, and that's because if it did, it would be number 1 week in and week out, year in and year out. And that book is, of course, the Bible. It is estimated that the total sales of the Bible are around 7 billion, that's almost one copy for every person alive today, and each year it adds another 100 million more to this total

Most households in the UK will own a bible, and I'm sure if you are listening to this today you probably have one nearby. But if you don't and would like one, I hope you can find a friend or neighbour who might be able to lend you a copy. Or otherwise please telephone your local church who I'm sure will be able to drop one at your door.

Because the Bible forms a central part of our society - If you go to court, you will be given the choice to swear your oath on a bible. Whilst according to Time magazine, the Bible "*has done more to shape literature, history, entertainment, and culture than any book ever written*".

So, what is it about this book written between 2 and 4,000 years ago that still makes it so central to our society and to our lives today? Why do so many of us, of so many ages, from so many different cultures and backgrounds still turn to it for guidance, encouragement, hope and inspiration?

Well Timothy Dudley-Smith certainly sees its central role in the second verse of today's hymn where he writes that God's word, the bible.....Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze, Teaches and trains, Rebukes us and inspires us:

This part of the hymn is based on a verse from the second letter St Paul wrote to Timothy, in which he says "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

The key part of this verse and the answer to our question of why the bible remains so important, are those first words, "*All Scripture is God-Breathed*".

Christians believe that the Bible is God's word in written form – it is God speaking to you and to me.

Whilst of course it was the work of human beings, there were more than 40 different writers over the 1,600 years or so that it was written, it is ALSO fully inspired by God.

Yes it was written by specific people, at specific times often looking at specific circumstances - and therefore our challenge is often to understand and apply those teachings to our lives today - BUT Christians believe that as it is also inspired, 'God-breathed ' and so has authority to speak into our lives.

Psalms 119 says "*your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*" and today in this time of lockdown I think the Bible can help us in 3 ways:

- firstly, it is a place of light and security in what may feel a rather dark world,
- secondly is a guide for our next steps, our day to day activity
- and finally, it is a light on the path ahead, showing us our destination, where God wants to lead us.

One of the many wonderful things about the Bible is that it is honest about the challenges and difficulties of life. It doesn't hide the struggles, failures and fears of even some of our greatest heroes. You will find comic moments and pratfalls as you turn the pages

But you will also find that it is not afraid to admit doubt, grief and despair. More than half of the Psalms are laments and the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations face these things head on. They deal honestly with loss and grief and help us find a God who draws alongside us in these dark times.

If, at the moment, you are really struggling with fear or anxiety or maybe loss and grief, I really encourage you to be honest about this with God in prayer – tell him straight on what you are feeling – He won't be shocked and will love your openness and honesty, but also if you can try and read some of the psalms. Here you will find questions raised, doubts admitted but you will also find a God who can be trusted and who will support you. And I am confident they will help bring truth and light to the dark place in which you stand.

The Bible can also be our guide in the day to day decisions we make as we move forward step by step. As Timothy Dudley Smith says.... It....teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us. The Bible is our guidebook to life. It shows us how to behave and what to aspire to. That goes far beyond things like the 10 commandments as it also helps us understand the importance of giving and forgiving, how to treat each other, how to bring up our children and care for the poor and the elderly. It sets out the guidelines to build a balanced, healthy society.

But it is not only a lamp for our current footsteps, it lights the pathway for our whole life. Many Christians see the bible as a love letter from God. It tells us of his Holiness and power but also of his love for us and his desire for relationship, and at the centre of all of this, and at its very heart, it is a portrait of Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that we see God's holiness and love come alive. As John says in his gospel, *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all"*

And it is from the Bible that this light truly shines. Where we can learn who Jesus was, why he chose to die and how we can be forgiven. And, if you would like to know more about this, then the best place to start reading are gospels at the beginning of the new testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It doesn't matter which one, but I would encourage you to just start with one of them and see what happens.

And if you do, my prayer, would be that you find, just as Timothy Dudley Smith does, that God's word will speak to your heart and set your soul ablaze.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you for the Bible – your word of life that can speak to my heart and set my soul ablaze.

Thank you that it can bring light into my darkest moments, it can be my guide in the day-to-day and it is a beacon of light for my whole life as it reveals the wonders of Jesus love for me.

Please help me to turn to the bible in this time of isolation, confident in the knowledge that you will meet me there. Please teach me, train me, encourage me and, if necessary, rebuke me. I ask Lord that as I read, you will make the words come alive in my heart and in my mind.

In the name of Jesus, I pray

Amen

9. THY HAND, O GOD, HAS GUIDED

A vicar was once showing a young boy around his churchyard and pointed to the list of names on the war memorial. *"These are all the brave people who died in the services"* he explained helpfully, but the boy turned to look at him and asked, *"did they die in the morning service or was it the evening service?"*

I suspect there are some of us who's image of church is about as positive as that boy's. The thought of sitting on a hard pew, listening to a boring sermon and saying words we don't understand is an experience to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Some might see church as providing a useful service for key stages of our lives such as christenings, weddings and funerals - hatch, match and despatch as some people put it - but see no role for it on a regular basis.

Others, may just be interested in the buildings, the beautiful architecture or wonderful pieces of art inside, but have no desire to explore the story or reason behind these things.

And if we are honest, unfortunately some may have a very negative view of the church from bad experiences when they were young.

And whilst I don't want to say anything that diminishes this, I don't believe any of these images reflect what, at its heart, God intends the church to be.

Certainly, Edward Plumptre who wrote this hymn in 1864, didn't share these views. In fact he originally called this hymn *"Church Defence"* - a song of thanks to God for His faithfulness in guiding and blessing the church, in helping the church share the good news about Jesus and reflecting that in the end the church, whatever faults it may have, will complete its work and join God forever in the Kingdom of heaven.

And he ends each verse with that wonderful affirmation *"one Church, one Faith, one Lord"*

Edward Plumptre was born in 1821 and spent much of his life as an academic. He was ordained aged 26 and for the next 34 years was chaplain and then a professor at Kings College in London. He was also a passionate supporter of women's higher education and served as principal of Queens College. In 1881 he moved to become Dean of Wells Cathedral and died 10 years later aged 70.

Plumptre understood that the church wasn't just the physical building in a town or village, nor a collection of Sunday services, nor even all the different denominations that are around today, but something much more.

The bible uses more than 100 different images and analogies to describe the church including the people of God, the family of God, the body of Christ, a holy temple and the bride of Christ. All of these images and the many more in the bible help describe the true nature of this group of 2½ billion people alive today, and the billions more through history, who have called themselves Christians.

They paint a picture of something that is so much more than the flawed and incomplete individual churches we see around us. For just as God sees you and I as His perfect children - made clean by Jesus despite our obvious flaws and failings - so He too sees the church for what he is making it through Jesus, rather than what it currently is.

Let's briefly consider some of those biblical analogies for the church:

As the People of God, we are reminded that we are all part of one universal church across the whole world, with people from all backgrounds, of all colours and speaking all languages. In the book of Revelation, St John describes the church as a "*great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language*". There is one church – and it belongs not to any denomination – but to Jesus Christ.

As the Family of God, we know that although we are all different, we are also part of the same family. Each of us is a son or daughter of God, and we carry that family resemblance, whether we recognise it or not, and are therefore called to love each other as brothers and sisters.

The image of the church as the Body of Christ reminds us that we are God's hands and his feet on this earth, that He has chosen to work with us and through us to care for those around us and for his creation. And just as a body has many different parts, so each one of us is called to be different. We each have different gifts and skills, but when we work together these differences complement each other to form one unified whole.

When we consider the church as the Holy temple of God, we remember that we are called to be a link between God and the rest of the world. Just like the priests in the Jewish Temple, each of us can help bring the presence and blessings of God to those around us as we love, care and share our faith in Him and also each of us can lift and hold those around us before God - as we pray for them

Finally, the Bible, uses the analogy of the church being the Bride of Christ. In the book of Ephesians, St Paul describes how Jesus loves the church and how he is preparing her to be a perfect, holy and blameless bride.

He says this to give us a glimpse of what Jesus intends the church to be and what it will one day become and encourages us to respond to this picture by choosing to live as much as we can in holiness and purity now, to be changed and to be made beautiful until we are truly fit to be his bride.

Now I appreciate that this may sound rather fanciful, but I hope it will inspire and encourage each of us to engage more and help make the church here on the earth more like what it will one day be in heaven.

And to do this we need to work together because Christianity is a team sport. John Wesley said "*the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion*" because we need each other to encourage, teach, admonish, love, and care for one another. There is the story of the young Christian who questioned a wise old man about why he needed to be part of a church. The old man said nothing, but walked up to the fire, took out a single burning coal and placed it on the hearth. Quickly it began to lose its glow. After a few minutes he picked it up and placed it back in the fire and there it began to glow again. The same is true for each one of us – we thrive and glow when we are part of the church.

But, I'm sure I can hear you asking, what does all this mean now, at this time of social distancing and crisis? If I am stuck alone in my house, how can I be part of a church, how can I give and receive love and care from others?

Well first of all I acknowledge it is really hard at this time, there are no easy answers but here are a few brief thoughts that might help.

Firstly, if you are already part of a church, then please telephone those you know who are stuck alone indoors, or if you, yourself are stuck indoors please pick up the phone and talk to any of those you know.

Secondly pray. Pray for those you know locally and far away, pray for your local church, for your local NHS teams, for care workers and for our government. Pray for the sick and for the bereaved. By praying, you are joining with all those other millions and millions of people who are praying worldwide, and you will be part of that one family of God.

If you are not part of a church and would like to be, ask anyone you know who might be able to put you in touch with one, or if you don't know who to speak to, you can call the National Friendship Phonenumber on 0203 968 4330 and they will be able to link you with a local church and also find all sorts of other help

for you. Their number again is 0203 968 4330. I will repeat the number again right at the end of this session after our final prayers.

Finally, of course, please do keep calling Daily Hope. In addition to Hymns We Love there are lots of other options and if you haven't found them yet, you can press 4 when you first call in and then you can choose listen and join in with other prayers or the weekly church service.

At this time it is so important for us to remember that we are all together in this, we are all part of one church, we share one faith and we have one Lord. So, let's sing this wonderful hymn one more time and remember I will repeat the phone number to link with your local church after the prayers that follow this hymn.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that no matter where I am today, I can be part of your family, part of your worldwide church of billions of people.

Thank you also that I can be part of your local church, here where I live, and I ask that during this time of separation you will help me to connect or re-connect with those around me.

I pray that you would encourage and enable my local church to be your hands, your feet and your presence within my town or village in the days ahead, and that I will be able to play whatever part I can - in that.

In the name of Jesus, I pray

Amen

10. BREATHE ON ME, BREATH OF GOD

Every generation regards previous generations with both a bit of romanticism and a bit of superiority. Young people tend to assume no-one has ever known the struggles they know whilst their elders often think the young don't realise just how fortunate they are.

Ask someone about Victorian times and you'll probably find they carry the same mixture of sentiments. For many of us, the image of the Victorian era is of a generation of emotions being held below the surface, of stiff upper lip and of understatement, a period when many struggled to express their feelings fully.

And yet this short, gentle, wonderful hymn, written right in the middle of that period by Edwin Hatch is just the opposite. It is a quiet, intimate prayer to God, to be filled with His Holy Spirit so that, as Edwin Hatch says,

"I may love the way you love and do what you would do"

At first glance Hatch would appear to fit the more rigid Victorian stereotype. Born in 1835, he studied at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, before being ordained as a Church of England Minister and taking up a post as professor of classics in Toronto, Canada. He returned to Oxford University in 1867 and remained there as an academic and theologian for the next 22 years until his death aged just 54.

But there was more to Edwin Hatch, than just a dry academic. His love of poetry and, in particular, Tennyson, led him to be the dominant figure in the 'Birmingham Set' which he founded whilst at Oxford with a group of other students who originally also came from Birmingham. This small group included the designer and poet William Morris and the painter Edward Burne-Jones and is often regarded as the birthplace of the British Arts & Crafts movement. He also had strong links with Lewis Carroll, the author of the Alice in Wonderland books.

And in this hymn, we can see both elements of Edwin Hatch's character brought together. It is both a thoughtful and intelligent prayer for a deeper spirit-filled life and a personal, gentle, love letter to God and, in particular, the Holy Spirit.

In both Hebrew and Greek the word for "Spirit" is 'pnuema' the same as for wind, air and breath, and therefore the Breath of God, whom we are singing to throughout the Hymn today, is in fact the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit as we normally refer to Him.

Now I am aware that for many of us, the idea of praying to or singing to the Holy Spirit, can be a hard concept to get our heads around. We can understand praying and singing to God, the Father, and also praying and singing to Jesus, His Son, but the Holy Spirit can somehow seem less real, less personal and maybe more distant.

This may not have been helped by the King James version of the Bible calling Him the Holy Ghost, as that brings up a whole different set of images and impressions.

So, what can, and do we know about him?

Well firstly he is not an impersonal force, like a ghost, but a person - the third person of the Trinity, with God the Father and Jesus, who is God the Son. And therefore, He is God.

He was there right at the beginning of creation - the second verse of Genesis tells us that *"the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters"* and he will be there right at the end of time - in the final verses of the final chapter of Revelation we read that the Spirit is calling us to *"Come"*.

Throughout Jesus' ministry we see his dependence on and partnership with the Holy Spirit:- at his baptism the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, he is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he is tempted for 40 days, he returns from the desert in the power of the Holy Spirit and he announces his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue with the words *"the Spirit of the Lord is on me"*

And as he looks forward, Jesus tells his disciples that it is good that he is going away because the Father will send 'another comforter'. His promise is that the Holy Spirit would come to be with each of them, and each of us, permanently, to teach, to empower and to guide. But, Jesus says, this will only happen after he has left them and ascended to heaven.

And just in case they didn't quite understand the full importance of this message, he uses his very final words on earth to drive it home ... he says

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes... and...You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth"

This was his final chance to prepare the disciples for the rest of their lives without him physically beside them... and it is both a statement of fact and a call to action. It's a promise that we will receive power, we will be witnesses but also a command to go – that requires a response from the disciples and from us.

And this is true of all that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. When He comes, He comes to change us, to help make us more like Jesus, and to be agents of Jesus' continued work in the world – to love, redeem and transform.

And that is the prayer that Edwin Hatch puts on our lips in this hymn.

In the first verse he asks the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, to *“fill me with life anew, that I may love the way you love, and do what you would do”*

Hatch is clear that he wants God, the Holy Spirit, to change him for a purpose.... So that he can love and act like God loves and acts.

In the same way in the second verse he asks

*“Breathe on me, Breath of God, until my heart is pure,
until my will is one with yours, to do and to endure”*

He asks God to purify his heart in order that his will, his hopes, his motives and his desires become more like God's. And this is his prayer so that he can do God's work not just for now – but with resilience and endurance. This is the prayer of someone who wants Christ to come and live his life in him.

So, let's go back for a moment to that point 2,000 years ago. Jesus has just ascended to heaven leaving the disciples with that promise and command: that they will receive power and they will be his witnesses.

But then it all goes quiet, the disciples get on with some admin, choosing a replacement disciple for Judas, but primarily they just wait and pray.

And then, 10 days later, when they were all gathered together, the bible tells us that *“suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven And ... all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”*

And this was the point where their lives – and the life of the world - was changed. This group of believers who just a few weeks earlier had been sitting terrified in the upper room after Jesus had died, were suddenly empowered to turn the world upside down. That day, 3,000 people became Christians and the book of Acts then shows how they were bold witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem and then Judea and Samaria and then on to the ends of the earth in a process which still continues to this day.

So, what does this mean for you and for me? - especially at this time of social isolation and lockdown - when the one thing we can be fairly certain of is that we will not be travelling to the ends of the earth anytime soon!

Well, the fact we can't travel, maybe can't come out of our house or even our room, does not mean we don't still need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

St Augustine said *"Without the Spirit we can neither love God nor keep His commandments"*

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit our helper, our comforter and our along-sider. The Holy Spirit is God coming personally to us to work within us so that we might know and love God more. He gives us assurance, guides, teaches and directs us. He gives us gifts and skills to help serve him and those around us better.

And he purifies us. In his second letter to the Corinthians St Pauls tells us that it is the Spirit of God who transforms us into God's image with ever increasing glory. It is he who helps us do the right things and helps stop us doing the wrong thing.

If you are feeling weak, or angry or tempted - ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and come along side you to guide you, teach you and strengthen you.

If you are feeling afraid, alone or depressed - ask the Holy Spirit to fill you and come along side you to be your comforter, your helper and to reveal God's love for you more deeply.

And if you are able to do these things regularly then your life will be transformed as you grow to be more like God. The bible calls these changes the Fruit of the Spirit, they are the natural result of living a life filled with the Holy Spirit and they are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And at this time, as much as at any other time, each of us need lives that are filled with these things and therefore we need lives that are filled with the Holy Spirit.

We need to be filled by Him for ourselves - as peace, patience and joy are things which are so very hard to find at the moment,

we need to be filled by Him for our interactions with others - so that we can demonstrate and share God's love, kindness and gentleness with the many or the few people we will see during the coming weeks and

we need to be filled by Him to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God.

So, let's sing again

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love the way you love,
and do what you would do*

Closing Prayer

Breathe on me, Breath of God,

*I thank you Lord that you send your Holy Spirit to comfort, guide, teach and direct me
- to help me know you and love you more.*

And so, I ask that you would come again, breathe on me and fill me with your Holy Spirit that I may love the way you love and do what you would do.

In the name of Jesus, I pray

Amen

11. HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

I must admit that Holy, Holy, Holy is one of my favourite hymns, and what I love so much about it, is that it just focuses entirely on God.

Many hymns, including most of those we have looked at in Hymns We Love, are as much about us as they are about God. They concentrate on our relationship and our response to God or ask for his help and guidance in our lives. These are all wonderful and important things to reflect on and to sing about..... but sometimes it is good to just stop - and find the time, not to think about ourselves at all, but to just focus on, and worship, God for who He is, and not for what he can do in our lives. And that is what this hymn does so beautifully and that is what we will try to do today - to take a little time out and delve a little more deeply into who God is.

This wonderful hymn was written by Reginald Heber 200 years ago and is based on St John's visions of heaven in the book of Revelation, at the very end of the bible. John's vision shows God symbolically sitting on a throne surrounded by heavenly creatures and people from every part of the world who are all worshipping Him and saying "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come*".

And Heber picks up on this phrase and much of the other imagery from Revelation in this hymn to help us better understand the glory, the holiness and the love of God.

Reginald Heber was born in 1783 into a wealthy educated family. He was a clever child, translating Latin texts into English when he was just 7, and winning poetry prizes whilst at Oxford University. He was ordained aged 24 and for the next 16 years was rector of his family's church in Hodnet, near Shrewsbury in a role he would later describe as being "a half-way station between a parson and a squire".

But he always had a bigger vision both of God, as we see in this hymn which he wrote whilst at Hodnet, and of God's call on his life. And so, in 1825 he and his young family set sail for India where he would be appointed the second bishop of Calcutta.

And this role certainly met his dreams of having a bigger impact for God – He was moving from a parish of a few thousand people in Shropshire to a diocese covering millions upon millions of people. As bishop of Calcutta, he was not just responsible for the church in that city, but for all of modern-day India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Australia and even significant parts of

Southern Africa. Its perhaps not surprising then that he died, utterly exhausted only 3 years later!

But in that short time, he achieved so much, travelling extensively, absorbing and appreciating much of the Indian culture, establishing a theological college and ordaining the first Indian national as a priest.

And he died leaving us this wonderful hymn to the majesty and holiness of God. It was written specifically for Trinity Sunday which falls 8 weeks after Easter and focuses on one of the great mysteries and one of the most misunderstood aspects of God's character. That He is, as we have just sung, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity"

Now the Trinity is quite a hard concept for us to get our heads around: the Bible is explicit, right from the very beginning, that there is, and can only ever be, ONE God and yet it then consistently presents that one God as three very distinct and different persons: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus) and God the Holy Spirit. It says very clearly that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God. Jesus tells his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and if you go to a church where you say the creed you will say something along the lines of "*I believe in the Father, I believe in the Son and I believe in the Holy Spirit*"

So, what is all this about? How can God be three but also one?

Many Christians are tempted to leave this in the "too hard to work out" box. I have some sympathy with that and we certainly will not be able to do much more than scrape the surface today, but I believe even if we only manage a little progress, we will, like Reginald Heber, be more able to see and understand just what an amazing God we have.

Probably, the biggest challenge when trying to understand the Trinity is simply the limitations of both our language and our experience. Even the great theologian St Augustine said that "*when the question is asked: three what? Human language labours under great poverty of speech*"...even he concluded that we use the words "3 persons" to describe the Trinity simply because there weren't any better ones and not because they really capture the full truth!

In the same way we have no reference to anything else where one plus one plus one... equals one! Many analogies have been used over the years, and I quite like the one of a 3-in-1 dishwasher tablet which has 3 distinct sections, each one having different ingredients and doing a different job, but all 3 making just one tablet.

It does sort of help, but I think you'll agree that it doesn't really get us to the full depths of what the Trinity is!

In the end, as we have noted before *"if God was small enough to be understood, he wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped"*

But despite all these challenges, it is still worth exploring because the Trinity is at the core of virtually all that matters in Christianity. For example, when we sang Rock of Ages, we saw that Jesus can only forgive our sins through his death on the cross because he is God. In the same way when we looked at Breathe on Me Breath of God we saw how the Holy Spirit is God alongside us and God living in us, He leads us, changes us and brings us closer to God the Father and God the Son.

And this brings us to the heart of the Trinity and that is the love and relationship that exists between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. This means that God has never been, and never will be, a lonely God, who somehow needed to create the universe to find relationship and love. He already has perfect relationship and perfect love within the Trinity between Father, Son and Spirit. He therefore does not need more. He is complete already.

And understanding that is really important because it means that God had no need to create the universe or you and I because he was and is, already completeThat means that both our creation and our redemption, Jesus saving us, are not things done by God because he had to or because something was missing, but they are simply acts of pure grace, of God's free, eternal and infinite love. God created us and then saved us because he chose to, because he wanted to express his love and not because he was lonely or because he needed to. Nothing has been pushed on God.

But we also see so much more of God in this hymn... we see his 4 key attributes - his glory, his lordship, his holiness and his love... all of which are essential to who He is and what make Him such a wonderful God.

And in this hymn, Heber paints us a picture of each of these attributes, starting with God's glory. In the second verse he picks up on John's vision of cherubim and seraphim, sort of angels if you like, falling down before God, and of saints laying down their crowns before him in worship.

Now glory is a word that is used a lot in the Bible, but can be a little tricky to tie down. It points us towards God's divine majesty, his sheer "Godness" if you like. When theologians think about this they often use the word transcendent which means he is beyond our reality, beyond anything we can see and experience here on earth. God's glory is that he is infinite, without limit and with no

dependence on anything or anyone. He was there in the beginning and will be there in the end. He will never change. He is before all things and he is above all things.

He is also Lord of all things - his lordship shows us that he is all powerful, all knowing and present everywhere throughout time and space.

And He is Holy. We explored God's holiness when we sang How Great Thou Art. It means he is separate, above and apart from all other beings. He is perfect, pure and good. There is no grey. And as we saw in How great Thou, God's holiness means that he seeks justice and opposes anything that is not equally holy. Because of God's holiness there will be judgement... BUT because of God's holiness, his glory and his lordship there is also his fourth attribute and that is God's perfect love.

It is unconditional love that lies at the heart of the Trinity and it is unconditional love that lies at the heart of God's relationship with us. It is for love that we are created, and it was by love that we were saved, and it is with love that we live our lives with our God. It is this God it is our duty, privilege and joy to worship – simply for his own sake.

And so, as we prepare to sing this hymn again let's reflect on the amazing infinite God that we have,

- A God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- A God of Glory who is infinite, unchanging and worthy of our worship
- A God who is Lord, who is all powerful, all knowing and above over all things
- A God who is the Holy one, perfect, exalted and separate, and
- A God of love, who is everlasting, gracious and redeeming

And that is the God we worship: glorious, holy, perfect and full of love, or as Reginald Heber so beautifully put it:-

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty.....
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee
perfect in pow'r, in love, and purity.*

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that you are perfect in power, in love and purity.

Thank you that you are infinite and unchanging , all powerful and all knowing, Holy, perfect and above all things.

And thank you that you are also a God of love who delights in our creation and delights in pouring out your love on each of us.

I ask that today, you will help me to see your glory and power a little more clearly, to worship you a little more joyfully and to experience your love and forgiveness a little more deeply.

I ask this of the Father, in the name of the Son and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

12. JUST AS I AM, WITHOUT ONE PLEA

Charlotte Elliott knew what it was like to struggle. For many years she struggled spiritually, unable to find a way to God, and for most of her life she struggled physically with a long term, degenerative condition that left her weak, depressed and bed bound. For a while she suffered from a sense of utter hopelessness. But from this dark place, she found a hope that brought light to her life and opened up a pathway to God that depended not on her own strength but on His. And so, in thankfulness for all that she had received from God, she wrote this beautiful hymn, first published in 1836.

Life had actually started fairly comfortably for Charlotte. She was born into a wealthy, devout and influential family in 1789. Her grandfather was Henry Venn, a founder of what was known as the Clapham Sect, which was a group of Christian philanthropists who fought for social change in the 18th century and who's most famous member was William Wilberforce who led the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. Her cousin was John Venn, who went on to create the Venn diagrams you may well remember with fondness, or otherwise, from your maths lessons at school.

She spent her first 32 years in Clapham. She was highly educated and had a passion for music and art, and despite her devout and serious upbringing, she became popular in the social circles of the day and was well known for writing humorous verse.

Then in 1821 she developed a severe illness which was to affect her for the rest of her life. Forced to withdraw from the social whirl, she began to struggle with her faith in God. As she looked at herself, all she could see was what was wrong with her life, she felt completely unworthy of God's love and unable to approach Him for help.

She tried turning to the local church for support but was told that she just needed to pray harder, study the bible more, and behave more nobly - Not surprisingly that advice didn't help her very much!.

Then one day, Cesar Malan, a Swiss clergyman who was visiting her father, asked her whether she felt at peace with God. Her immediate reaction was one of anger, she fled in a sulk and refused to speak to him for the rest of the day. But a few days later she apologised and asked him what she needed to do to approach God. His answer was simple. He said "Come, just as you are".

She felt a weight lifted from her and from that day she committed her life to God. That didn't mean everything immediately became easy, she continued

to struggle with illness for the rest of her life, but within those struggles she found a hope and comfort in God which she expressed in her writing. She published over 150 hymns and poems of which this is her most loved. Billy Graham used this hymn in almost every one of his evangelistic meetings, calling it "the strongest possible Biblical basis for the call of Christ.", whilst the hymn historian Kenneth Osbeck wrote that Just As I Am has "touched more hearts and influenced more people for Christ than any other song ever written"

What Charlotte Elliott had understood is that God doesn't require anything of us, except honesty. To approach God and be accepted by Him, we don't need to pretend to be anything we are not, we don't need to say special words, we don't need to perform special ceremonies, we don't need to know lots about God. We can still have doubts, we can still have fears. All we need to do is to come as we are and be honest about that.

That was Charlotte's experience and that was why she could say:

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come"

Charlotte remained ill for the rest of her life and in later years was unable to leave the house, and yet she remained positive and upbeat, grateful that God continued to love and accept her just as she was. Unable to attend church she wrote "My Bible is my church. It is always open, and there is my High Priest ever waiting to receive me... all I can want I find there"

She also continued to publish poems and hymns until shortly before her death in 1871 aged 82.

Many of us may find ourselves in a similar position to Charlotte. We may feel we are not good enough for God because of all the things we have done wrong, or we may struggle with doubts and fears, that leave God feeling distant and unfriendly.

Some of us may even have been given the same advice as Charlotte, to just pray more and to try harder to be a better person. And if you're in that position, you've probably found that advice as unhelpful as Charlotte did.

The wonderful, good news of Christianity, is there is nothing we can do to persuade God to love and accept us. He already does! In fact, because everything has already been done by Jesus, we don't have to do anything other than to humbly and honestly accept the wonderful gift of life, love and hope that Jesus offers you and me.

Jesus simply invites us to come as we are and to keep coming. This is true at the beginning of our journey and true throughout our whole life:-

If you mess up and do things wrong, you can still come to God as you are. If you have doubts, fears or questions, you can still come to God even though they remain unresolved,

if you have not talked to God for years, and turned your back on him, you can still always return and come back to him just as you are.

Charlotte Elliot continued to have periods of struggle throughout her life. She suffered from bouts of depression and hopelessness, and yet she always knew she could continue to come to God, just as she was, and he would accept and love her regardless.

She knew there is no point in hiding depression or doubts, fears or anger from God - it's not as if he doesn't already know about them – but she also knew that even with them she could approach God confidently, absolutely certain that, as we have sung in this hymn, God would always welcome her, pardon her, cleanse her and relieve her. In the same way, you need never worry that God will reject you, because he never, ever will.

But there will be some of us listening today, who already know this very well. We may have experienced many years of knowing the reality of God's welcome and forgiveness and we are confident that we are securely held in his hand. Well for us I believe there is a further challenge in this hymn and in the life of Charlotte Elliot - and that is to learn to live in gratitude and joy.

The Australian novelist Morris West once noted that as we reach a certain stage in our lives, we need only have 3 phrases in our spiritual vocabulary: Thank you, Thank you and Thank you!.

The catholic writer Ronald Rolheiser explains this further *“Gratitude”* he suggests *“is the ultimate virtue, undergirding everything else, even love.... [It] is the basis of all holiness. The holiest person you know is the most grateful person you know. That is true too for love..... Real love roots itself in gratitude, and gratitude roots itself in the recognition.... that nothing is owed to us.”*

I believe that Charlotte Elliot truly understood this and learned to live a life of joy and gratitude despite her long-term illness. We see that in the relationships she had with those around and the love that she inspired, we see that when, even though she could know no longer attend church, she took delight in just reading her bible at home, and we see that in the words of this hymn which express so eloquently, that she brought nothing to God, was owed nothing by

God but still had been given everything of real value by Him. As she says in the third verse of our hymn she had come to God poor, wretched and blind and in return had been given sight, riches and healing of the mind.

She had seen and experienced the underserved generosity of God's love and my prayer for each of us is that we too would see and experience the same, so that we too can live lives that are informed by, and soaked in, gratitude to God.

And if gratitude for what God has done for us forms our motivation to serve and support others we will be taking a big step on our journey to become more like God. Once we realise that everything is a gift from God, then giving it away becomes easier. To quote Ronald Rolheiser again *"If our love and service of others does not begin in gratitude then we will end up carrying other peoples' crosses and sending them the bill"*

And finally, gratitude also leads to joy. The highest compliment we can give a gift giver, is to thoroughly enjoy their gift. God has given us so much and wants us to enjoy it. As we come to God just as we are, offering him nothing and receiving from him everything, the relationship that is built is not defined by guilt but by love, and love drives out fear and has no room for guilt, we are just left with gratitude and joy. That is what Charlotte Elliot experienced, and that is my prayer for you as we sing, *"Just As I am, O Lamb of God, I come"*.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that I can come to you just as I am. That I don't need special words, I don't need to understand everything about you, that I can still have questions and doubts, I can still have done things wrong. That whatever place I am in, you still delight in me coming and in you I can find refuge, forgiveness, love and acceptance.

Thank you Father, I am truly grateful for your unconditional love poured on me. Help me now to accept it, and help me to live a life of gratitude for all that you have done for me.

Thank you.

Amen

13. GUIDE ME, O THOU GREAT REDEEMER

If you have ever been to a rugby match involving the Welsh national team you will have heard this hymn ringing out from the stands throughout the game. It is now so established with the Welsh fans that it has almost become a second national anthem. And yet its popularity extends far beyond both the Welsh borders and rugby stands. Football fans will also sing along, although “feed me now for evermore” has evolved into “We’ll support you ever more” or, if your team is losing and you’ve gone quiet, the opposition fans will often strike up with “You’re not singing anymore”.

In church and beyond this remains one of our most loved hymns and inspired the name of the popular TV programme “Songs of Praise”.

The hymn was originally written in Welsh in 1745 by William Williams but was not set to this famous tune, known as Cwm Rhondda, for another 160 years. It was only in 1907 that John Hughes wrote this melody for the inauguration of a new organ at Capel Rhondda, in the Rhondda Valley. Hughes himself played the organ for the first performance whilst the congregation sang the English version of these wonderful words.

The son of a wealthy farmer, William Williams initially wanted to become a doctor but all that changed when he went to an outdoor meeting led by the evangelist Howell Harris. Following that, he began training as an Anglican priest but felt God calling him to a more itinerant ministry and soon joined the Methodist Harris and others on their missionary journeys around Wales. He continued travelling for the next 43 years, covering thousands of miles each year and becoming one of the leaders of the Welsh Methodist revival.

Just like Charles Wesley in the English branch of Methodist movement, William Williams also had a passion for poetry, writing over 800 hymns which were the musical backdrop to the Welsh revival.

It is perhaps not surprising, given his wandering lifestyle, that much of the imagery of this, his most famous hymn, is taken from the book of Exodus and the story of God rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and how, under the leadership of Moses, the whole nation set off on the long journey to return to the promised land.

That journey turned out to be much longer and more complicated than they could have imagined, but God used those 40 years of meandering to teach the Israelites about who he is and how they should live. It was during these travels that God gave Moses the 10 commandments and many of the other

laws and teachings that formed the foundation of the Jewish faith and still drive our understanding of who God is today.

But God also used the journey to reveal himself as their saviour – the one who rescued them, freed them and provided for their every need, who not only led them to their ultimate destination but also guided and directed them in their day to day choices. He provided food and water, he led them with a pillar of cloud in the day and of fire at night so they knew exactly where they should go.

And William Williams knew that God had done the same for him in his 43 years of wandering around Wales. God had guided him on how to live his life but also on the individual decisions he made along the way.

And he reflects this throughout the hymn. In calling to mind God's provision of manna from heaven for the Israelites, so we are led to ask God to feed us evermore with the bread of heaven, in remembering how God guided them through the desert so we are confident to ask for the fire and cloudy pillar to lead us all our journeys through, and just as at the end of forty years God brought the Israelites safely to the promised land of Canaan and the river Jordan so we have faith to ask God to do the same for us so that we can be with God, singing songs of praises, for evermore.

And in telling this story, Williams challenges each of us to let God be our guide throughout our lives. To trust in him as he leads us through the deserts, to feed us with the bread of heaven, to be our strength and shield, to encourage and protect us as we journey, and to bring us safely to the eternal future of joy and songs of praises spent with him.

But what does that mean in practice? It is easy to sing "Guide me O my great redeemer" but how does God do that today ? how do we ask Him to guide us?

Well the first thing to say is that through the Bible God has already given us all the guidance we need to know about how to approach our lives. From the 10 commandments given to the Israelites on their journey from Egypt and continuing through the rest of the old and new testaments and through all of Jesus teachings, God has shown us how to live to our lives - in relation to him, to others and to ourselves, what is helpful and what is not, what is good and what is bad. Through the Bible He has provided the framework within which He wants us to build our lives.

But Christians believe that in addition to this general guidance, God will also give us specific guidance at specific times. Now if I'm honest, Christians have

a range of views on how much and in what areas God specifically guides us, but I believe two things are clear from what we know of God from Bible.

Firstly, He does give specific guidance – because he is personally and intimately committed to us. He did it throughout the Israelites journey to Canaan and He consistently led and guided individuals through both the old and new testaments on what to say, where to go and what to do.

Secondly, we should actively ask Him to guide us. The early church continually turned to God for specific guidance on what to do, and time and again, God guided them, and God want us to do the same today. Paul tells us to look for and test God's good, pleasing and perfect will. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that God knows the plans he has for us, in Psalm 37 we are encouraged to commit our way to the Lord, to trust in him and he will act.

So, if God is going to guide us, how will he do it? Well I would suggest we can confidently look for God to guide us through our heads, through our hearts, through our actions and through our friends and those around us.

He guides us through our heads at the most basic level by plain old common sense. More often than not if something appears to be the sensible thing to do, it probably is the sensible thing to do, and if something appears to be foolish, then it almost certainly is.... God has given us common sense for a purpose! However, Christians believe that whilst common sense may be the starting point of God's specific guidance, it is not the finishing point.

We can and should ask him to guide and prompt our thoughts through the Holy Spirit. God can and will speak to Christians, as we read the bible, through our dreams and imagination, through pictures in our minds, and through contemplation and reflection.

He can also speak and guide us through our hearts. Psalm 37 says "*take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart*". Now certainly doesn't mean he randomly gives us whatever we want at that moment, rather as we spend time with, and focus on, God, he will shape what our desires are, he will influence and guide what we want from life and what we want to do. In this way he shapes the desires of our hearts and guides us in the direction he wants our lives to follow.

He can also guide us through our actions. Listening to God, and being guided by him, is an active and not a passive thing. To steer a ship, it has to be moving. If it is sitting still in port, you can move the rudder all you want, but nothing is going to happen. God therefore asks us to move forward with him, to ask him for guidance, and to open doors and shut doors as we try them. We will of

course make mistakes and sometimes head in the wrong direction, but God would much rather we try and sometimes mess up, than not try at all. He asks us to step forward with him, to be our guide as we do, and to trust him to pick us up if we fall. Just like a child learning to walk, it's not the falling over that is the problem, it's not getting up.

And finally, God guides us through our friends and other Christians. This may be as simple as just seeking the advice of a wise friend, or hearing something in a sermon or talk that really seems to speak to us, or it could be someone else hearing something specific from God about us, and then then sharing it with us.

Now I am aware that there may be some of us listening today, who are stuck inside and may feel too old or too weak to be guided to do anything for God. Well, if you do feel that way, can I assure you that God doesn't see you like that and that you still have a vital role to play in God's world. In particular it would be wonderful if you are able to pray – pray for others that you know in your church or elsewhere that they may be guided by God in all that they do, and pray for yourself, that God will guide you to pray for the things that are on his heart for those you know and for the world around us.

Therefore, whatever our situation, we can be confident that God can and will speak to us in all sorts of ways through our heads, hearts, actions and through others. But in all the noise and messages that we hear how do we know which ones are from God and which aren't?

Well the place we must always start is the bible. If anything we think God is saying to us contradicts the bible, then we can know absolutely that it is not from God. God will never ask us to do anything that contradicts his general will in the bible. It is the bedrock and the absolute standard for all our decisions in life.

It is therefore really important that we try to understand both the breadth and the depth of the bible.

We need to understand the breadth, the big picture of God's involvement with the world, of his character and of the standards he expects of us. This is one of the things we are trying to do through Hymns We Love, but also please keep reading the bible and also try to read good books, recommended by sensible Christians, about God's character or listen to talks about him and the bible.

Also try and understand the depth of the bible. If you can, get bible study aids to help you study individual chapters and books. Spend time focusing on a short passage or verse, pray about it, meditate on it, reflect and let God speak to you about the specifics of your life through it, all the time weighing that up against the big picture of who God is.

And finally keep on trying. Keep looking for God to guide you, keep asking God to guide you and keep expecting God to guide you. The more time we spend with God and seek his guidance, the more he will guide and the more we will be able to hear and recognise his voice guiding our lives.

Just like the Israelites, we don't always know where we're going tomorrow, but the final destination of the promised land is never in doubt. Just like Israelites we can mess up and lose our way, but just like the Israelites God wants to use our journey to teach us, to guide us and to help us become more like him. And so, let us turn to God and ask him. *"Guide me O my great redeemer,"* and to *"feed me now and evermore"*.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that you love me, and you are personally and intimately committed to me. Thank you that you therefore want to guide me through the big and the small things of my life.

Help me now Lord to seek your guidance and to follow where you lead. Help me also to spend time getting to know you so that I can learn to recognise your voice as you speak to me through my head, through my heart, through my actions and through those around me.

In the name of Jesus, I ask this

Amen.

14. IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

At the beginning of 1871 everything must have looked good for Horatio Spafford. The 42-year-old had been married to Anna for 10 years and they had 5 beloved children, one boy and four girls. Horatio was a senior partner in a successful law firm and that spring invested heavily in a number of properties to support their comfortable lifestyle in a northern suburb of Chicago.

But then tragedy struck. First Horatio & Anna's only son died. Then in October of that year, the Great Fire of Chicago reduced the city to ashes, destroying most of his investments.

Two years later and with many of their business issues still unresolved, the family decided to have a change of scenery and visit their friend and well-known preacher, DL Moody who at that time was speaking in Britain. Last minute complications over business issues meant Horatio had to stay behind and so Anna and the four girls went ahead with Horatio due to follow a few days later.

But halfway across the Atlantic, the ship Anna was travelling in, was hit by another vessel... and in the chaos that followed, the lifeboats couldn't be launched as they had recently been painted and were stuck to the deck.

The ship sunk in just 12 minutes and 226 people died.

Anna was found unconscious but alive, floating on a plank of wood, however all four of their daughters - Annie, Maggie, Bessie and Tanetta - had drowned. When she eventually reached land, Anna sent a telegram to her husband. It simply said, "*Saved alone – What shall I do?*".

Horatio immediately left Chicago to join her in Europe his ship passing right over the very spot where his daughters had died. But as he travelled alone on that journey, and despite all that had happened, he was able to turn to God and write the remarkable words of this hymn:

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

The words so inspired the composer Phillip Bliss that he wrote this tune specifically for them, naming it Ville Du Havre, which was the name of ship that Anna Spafford had travelled in.

The story of the Spafford's is a heart-breaking one, but also one that brings much hope in these dark and difficult times that we are currently facing. For to face such adversity and grief as Horatio did but then to respond so positively and with so much hope, is both a challenge and inspiration for each of us.

And I believe as we look at the life and response of Horatio Spafford, the answer to his peace and hope in the face of such sorrow comes from where he chose to focus his gaze. Put simply, with his eyes fixed on God he had a peace and perspective on life that supported him through his pain.

And I would like to suggest 5 things, inspired by Tim Keller's helpful book "Walking with God through Pain and Suffering" that might also help us find peace in difficult times, and these are:

Thinking, Thanking, Loving, Trusting and Hoping.

In his letter to the Philippians, St Paul explains how he has "*learned to be content in any and every situation*"

He says "*The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*".

Paul seems to be saying that this level of God-given peace is not something that comes naturally but rather something that, like Paul, we can learn to find in any and every situation.

And if we do learn it, it will guard our hearts and minds... it will surround us and protect us. God is not promising to take us out of whatever difficult situation we may be in, but He is promising that his presence will bring such peace so to overcome and protect us from our natural reactions of fear, pain and grief.

And we start this journey of learning by Thinking.

In the same passage Paul goes on to say "*whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things*"

Paul challenges us to consider where we focus our thoughts. Now, this doesn't mean we live in an unreal world of fluffy sheep and clouds, and it is not that things aren't really hard or painful. Rather he is suggesting we focus our thoughts on God and all that he has done for us.

And this is what Horatio Spafford did: in the third verse of our hymn he writes that the focus of his glorious thought is not the shipwreck, but that ...

*My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul*

To put that in more modern English Horatio is choosing to remember the sacrifice and pain that Jesus went through on the cross, to remember that like him God also has a lost his child Jesus when he died on the cross, so that Horatio and his daughters could have relationship with God.

That is why Horatio could write this to his sister in law - "*On Thursday last we passed over the spot where she went down, in mid-ocean, the waters three miles deep. But I do not think of our dear ones there. They are safe, folded, the dear lambs*".

Horatio knew his girls were safe with Jesus and this is what he chose to think on,

But as well as thinking, Paul encourages us to be Thanking. He says, "*with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*".

Reflecting on all God has done for us, in not just a cerebral exercise, but should lead to a heartfelt, thankful response. Just as it is important to say thank you when someone helps us, so it is important to say thank you to God – not because he needs the encouragement, or has an ego that needs massaging - but because it helps us to get ourselves and God in the right places in our lives. It gives us the right perspective.

And if we do this it will take us on from Thanking to Loving because it is important not just to think about the right things, but to Love the right things.

It is a simple fact that we will search for peace and meaning in whatever we love most – be that money, status, friends or God. Now, of course there is nothing wrong with loving all sorts of things - from our gardens to our closest family - and God is certainly not calling us to love them any less - He just wants us to love Him above all. it is not the bigness of our love for the people and things around us, but the smallness of our love for God that Paul is challenging us on.

There can be no doubt just how much Horatio loved his daughters, but he was able to find peace, the kind of peace which makes no sense, which transcends understanding, because his love for God was even bigger, and that gave him a perspective that enabled him to trust God.

He found that a life of thinking, thanking and loving God had enabled him to keep Trusting God through the very toughest of times. Horatio could not see the big picture, he couldn't make sense of the tragedy, he couldn't see a reason for it... but he knew and loved God enough to be able to trust him in this darkest of times.

And we may find ourselves in a similar situation where the pain we are going through makes no sense, seems unfair and maybe even cruel. There are no easy answers in such a situation. But when we sang the Lord's My Shepherd, we remembered that even in the darkest valleys God will be with us, we may not understand the situation or God, but we can learn to trust Him.

As Evelyn Underhill noted *"if God were small enough to be understood, he wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped"*

And that leads us to the final step ... after thinking, thanking, loving and trusting comes hoping.

In the last chapters of the Bible, St John tells us that at the very end of time, God himself will be with his people, He will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

This is the life-transforming, living hope that every Christian can cling to, safe in the firm knowledge that in the end, no matter what else happens we will be safe in hands of God. And this is the hope that sustained Horatio, the hope that led him to end his hymn with this picture of being face to face with God.

*And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul*

Let's now sing this wonderful hymn of hope one more time.

Closing Prayer

In John chapter 10, Jesus says that no-one can snatch the Father's sheep out of his hand.

Dear Lord

Thank you that whatever I feel, you are constant, and loving, and strong and I will always be safe in your hands.

*In this time of challenge and trouble - and in future if, and when, I face grief or fear
- please help me always to cling on this truth.*

*Please help me to keep my eyes fixed on you in the good times and the bad- - To
think, thank, love, trust and hope in the firm knowledge that you are the all-powerful,
all loving, God who saves.*

*And I ask that Your Peace, which transcends understanding, will guard my heart and
my mind in Christ Jesus.*

Amen

15. MAKE ME A CHANNEL OF YOUR PEACE

The wonderful words of this hymn, based on a well-known Catholic prayer, have been such a source of inspiration, challenge and encouragement for millions of people over the years, that they have almost become a part of our daily lives. They have been quoted by politicians from Margaret Thatcher to Bill Clinton, used for daily prayer by Mother Theresa and Desmond Tutu and they form part of the twelve-step process followed by Alcoholics Anonymous, often referred to as the “Step 11 Prayer”

In fact, they are so well known that we often assume this prayer has been around for centuries, particularly as it is called the Prayer of St Francis of Assisi, the twelfth century friar who is perhaps best known as the patron saint of animals.

However, there is no evidence at all that St Francis is the author, in fact the prayer was first published anonymously in 1912 in a small catholic newspaper and was probably written by the editor of that paper, a little-known French priest called Father Bouquerel.

It was then only set to music in 1967, when Sebastian Temple, a South African working for the BBC in London, wrote this melody specifically for it. But once established it quickly became hugely popular and was adopted as the anthem of the Royal British Legion and was sung at Princess Diana's funeral.

Although often called the Peace prayer, these words are really a very personal conversation between us and God. This hymn is all about how each of us, personally, respond to all that God has already done for us, by choosing to live lives that reflect the love, pardon, hope, light, joy, consolation, understanding and peace that we have received from Jesus

The hymn sets out a desire to live a life which values others above ourselves, that aims to give away and not to keep, to serve and not to be served and to love, even when it is difficult.

It sets a very high standard to aim for, but the wonderful thing about Christianity is that we don't have to pass this standard to earn our way to heaven or earn brownie points with God. As we have seen in Amazing Grace and the Lord's my Shepherd, we don't need to earn anything; God's love and forgiveness are complete and freely given - we just need to accept them.

The challenge of this hymn therefore is not to live a life of service because we have to persuade God to love us, but because we want to, because we want to respond to the love we have been given, by sharing it with those around us.

And this is the incredible thing, that as we give and serve and act more like Jesus, so we get to know him, trust him and love him more and little by little grow to be more like him and to live lives that are more fulfilling and more complete.

This is the upside-down economy of God, that the more we give away, the more we receive, and that is why we can sing that it is “in giving to all men that we receive”

But as we sing the hymn you may notice that the line before this one seems to say something that at first sight goes against what I have just said. “it is in pardoning that we are pardoned”. This seems to suggest that to be pardoned by God, to be forgiven, we have to first forgive all those around us.

In fact, if you think about the Lord’s prayer, it says much the same “*Forgive us our trespasses (or our sins) as we forgive those who sin against us*”. And if you read the passage in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus teaches The Lord’s prayer, he is even more unequivocal as he immediately follows it by saying ““*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. BUT if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*”

So, what is all this about? These words are so familiar that we often don’t think about them. Will we really only be forgiven by God, if we keep forgiving others? and if we don’t then can we lose His love and forgiveness?

Well let me be clear that this is definitely not what it means. If you have accepted Jesus’ gift of forgiveness, you ARE forgiven, the Bible says there is NOTHING you can do that will lose the love, grace and forgiveness of God, your Father.

You see the Lord’s prayer is a prayer for Jesus disciples. It is a prayer where Jesus shows his followers how to pray, AFTER they have become his followers.

Even as Christians, both the disciples and us still face a choice about how we want to live our lives. Therefore, the Lord’s prayer and this hymn are not about our eternal position, they are about our journey between now and there. Our response will not affect our destination, but will affect how rewarding our journey is to get there,

And forgiveness is absolutely central to this. It is often not easy, but it is always necessary. It is necessary in our ongoing relationship with God, with others, and even with ourselves.

It was 27 years ago that the black teenager Stephen Lawrence was murdered – because of the colour of his skin. His parent's fight for justice fundamentally challenged and changed British society, but still only 2 of the 5 murderers have ever been convicted. The impact has seen Stephen's parents, Neville and Doreen's marriage breakdown, and Neville move back to Jamaica, unable to live in the area of Stephen's death...

and yet finally, all these years later he has found a level of peace:

*"Because of my religious background," he says "I have forgiventhose racists who killed my son, because I couldn't go on with the rest of my life feeling anger about something that has destroyed my way of living [and] ... destroyed my marriage, SO I **HAD** TO FORGIVE THEM."*

Neville Lawrence has realised what many Christians have before him, that in order to have peace, he needed to forgive. That forgiveness was not about letting the murderers off the hook, it was not about denying justice, but it was about healing in his own life, it was about living in relationship with God.

It was about sharing the forgiveness he has received from God.

The broadcaster Chine Macdonald summed up Neville's response like this:

"forgiveness in light of these acts of hatred makes no sense. It lets people off the hook when they don't deserve it, but it is precisely because of this that I find forgiveness beautiful and profound, it is extravagant in its generosity, it is unnecessary in its mercy. It speaks to me of the open armed nature of a God who is full of compassion."

As Chine says, forgiving people who have wronged us or others appears to make no sense, but Jesus has said, and experience will show us, that if we can find a way to forgive it will change our own lives, releasing us from anger and hatred, it will change the lives of those around us, and potentially it may even change the lives of those who need our forgiveness.

But it is not easy.

In our lives many of us have been hurt, let down or suffered terribly because of what other people have done. We feel angry and may want revenge. Forgiveness may be the furthest thing from our minds. And even if we want to forgive, we may have no idea how to do it and what it will involve.

I would therefore like to finish by reflecting on what forgiveness might actually mean in practice and this starts by understanding what forgiveness is not.

- **Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness** – it is actually one of the hardest things we can ever do
- **Forgiveness is not about approving of what was done wrong** – God never approves of what we do wrong; he hates it, but still he forgives
- **Forgiveness is not about denying what was done or what we feel.** we're not excusing, or trying to justify what was done, or make it less serious than it really is. If you have been deeply wronged you may need to talk to others about what happened, you may need professional support, you may even need to talk to the police. Even talking about it could be really hard, but if you are carrying something that you have never discussed with anyone I would really encourage you to find someone you can trust to talk to about it. Finding a way to acknowledge and face what has happened, without trying to reduce or minimise it, is the vital first step on your journey to forgiving.
- **And that is why forgiveness does not prevent us from seeking justice** – we can and should insist on justice and a correct calling of account. Despite his forgiveness, Neville Lawrence is still determined to achieve justice. In such hard situations' forgiveness should restrain us from taking revenge or getting our own back but should not restrain us from seeking justice.

To totally forgive someone means to completely acknowledge and face what they did, without any denial of its seriousness or of the pain it has caused and then somehow, having taken all that on board, still forgive.

Does that sound unfair? Well, to an extent it is, BUT this is what Jesus has done for you and for me, and this is what he calls us to do for others. We don't get what we deserve and the challenge of forgiveness is to treat others as God has treated us.

True forgiveness is therefore about grace and mercy not retribution or vengeance. It can feel unfair, it is not deserved..... and it is very, very hard.

It is often not something that you want to do, but the example of Jesus and the words of this hymn, tell us that it is something that we should try to do..... as the holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom said "*forgiveness is an act of the will. And the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart*".

What does this act of the will mean in practice?

1. Firstly, it means telling God that you have decided to forgive them, but not necessarily telling anyone else. If at all possible, choose to move on, to stop

thinking it through, to stop rehearsing the wrongs in your head. Clearly if what has happened is illegal, then that may not be appropriate if you still need to seek justice, but for most other things, tell God you forgive and try as hard as you can to move on. In all circumstances give the hurt and the pain to God.

2. Be positive – Choose to view the person as someone who has also been created in the image of God and for whom Jesus has also died.
3. Pray – for them positively, pray for good things in their life. Pray for God to forgive and bless them and pray for yourself to be able to let go and move on. You will need God's help in this.
4. Repeat and repeat and repeat. Keep on forgiving today, tomorrow, this year and next.

If you and I can do this, consistently and repeatedly then we will truly be fulfilling our wish to be a channel of God's peace. Without forgiveness it is impossible to bring the love, hope, joy and peace that we have received from Jesus, but if we can learn to forgive others as we have been forgiven ourselves, then we can truly ask God to make us a channel of his peace.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you for all that you have given me - for the love, hope, light, joy, consolation, understanding and peace you have poured into my life. Help me Lord to share these wonderful gifts with those around me.

Thank you also for all that you have forgiven in me. I am so aware of all that I have done wrong that you have forgiven. Help me Lord to do likewise to others, to forgive those who have hurt or upset me and to pray for them, so that I may become a channel for your peace to come on earth as it is in heaven.

In Jesus name I ask this

Amen

16. DEAR LORD AND FATHER OF MANKIND

On our journey through Hymns We Love, we have heard what a wide range of writers and stories there are behind so many of our best known and most loved hymns. The writers have varied from Bishops and clergy to Swedish MPs, businessmen, ex -slave traders and even, in the case of The Lord's My Shepherd, the King of Israel. Some were originally written as poems and only put to music many years later, but I think we can confidently say that there is only one hymn on our list, where the writer not only never intended his words to be turned into a hymn, but almost certainly wouldn't have wanted them sung either - and that is the hymn we are looking at today - Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.

The verses that we know and love, are in fact the closing section of an extraordinary poem called the Brewing of Soma, written in 1872 by the highly regarded poet, John Greenleaf Whittier. The poem is actually a warning about the dangers of heightened religious experience – and it is clear John Whittier as a Quaker was drawn to a spirituality of peace and stillness through silence and contemplation.

Using these final verses of the poem to form the hymn we now know today is certainly beyond what the writer planned – but it perhaps reveals the universal longing for a profound sense of peace amidst our lives of busyness, noise and worry.

John Greenleaf Whittier was born into a poor, rural family in Massachusetts in 1807. There was little money for a formal education, but John was an avid reader and particularly loved the six books his father owned on Quakerism. As a result, he grew up a committed Quaker and this informed both his strong sense of social responsibility and his belief in the quiet, contemplative worship of God which were to become the twin pillars of his future writing. As a Quaker, he saw no place for strong emotions in his religious practices, and certainly nothing as frivolous as the singing of hymns!

Through his reading the young Whittier developed a love of poetry and in time became a successful and famous poet, part of the group now known as the Fireside Poets. In fact, he became so well known that the City of Whittier in California was named after him, along with 5 other towns, 2 mountains, 2 colleges, 2 bridges and even a world war II battleship!

Through his poetry and as an active politician he fought for justice and social responsibility and was particularly active in working to end slavery in the United States. In fact, it was only after the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery

was passed in 1865 that he turned his poetry to focus on other areas and he wrote what we now know as this wonderful hymn.

And although Whittier came from a different tradition to many of us, Christians throughout the years, have recognised the depth and wisdom in his words, and by turning them into a hymn have provided a popular and accessible route into exploring a quiet pathway to God.

And that is what I would like to explore today – how we can learn, in Whittier's own words, to let God "*Breathe through the heats of our desire [his] coolness and [his] balm;*" so that we might know something of that 'peace beyond understanding' that scripture promises us he brings and so we might learn to listen to God in our prayers rather than just talk at him and learn to relax in his presence and not just restlessly push on to the next thing on our to-do list.

Pete Greig, who is the Founder of the worldwide 24-7 prayer movement tells the story of sharing a pizza with an older and wise Roman Catholic priest called Brennan Manning. Pete had just founded 24-7 prayer and thought he was doing quite well and praying hard, so when the older priest asked him how he knew when he had prayed enough, Pete simply listed off all the things he was praying for as proof of what he was achieving.

He was therefore rather surprised when the priest suggested that all this activity wasn't going to get him very far ... but that silence would. Pete Greig records the conversation that followed...

"The priest took a sip of his Pepsi [and] said.....'The world is so full of need. You watch the news and there's so much tragedy. How many things do you have [add to] your prayer list after that? And then there are your friends: marriages breaking down, kids bullied, money worries, relatives dying. It's exhausting. It's overwhelming. There has to be another way'

*[Pete responds] 'And you think the way to address the world's problems is **silence?**'*

*'No' [the priest replied], 'I think the way to address the world's problems is **presence**'"*

Fr Manning goes on to explain that if we spend some time of each day focusing solely on Jesus, then we can carry his presence with us into the rest of the day with a heightened awareness that he is with us, he is for us, that he likes us and that he hears our thoughts. We can then start to pray in real-time, by being aware of the presence of God in all that we do & see as we do & see it. We begin to instinctively lift things up to God as we see them on the news or

hear about our friend's problems. Prayer becomes less about being something we do, but something we live.

But how do we make our whole lives a prayer to God?

Well, like Fr Manning, John Whittier also understood that the starting point of this was learning to quietly focus on God, so that bit by bit, our lives may reflect him more.

*Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.*

To understand what it means to recognise the presence of God in our lives, there can be no better illustration than the life of a French peasant, born around 1614, called Nicholas Herman. Poor, illiterate and hungry, Nicholas joined the army as a young man mainly to ensure he could get at least one proper meal a day. But whilst there, standing in the middle of a muddy battlefield, he had an experience of the love and grace of God that was to transform his life.

As a result, when he was badly injured and had to leave the army, he decided to apply to become a monk in a Carmelite monastery. However, because he was unable to read or write, his application was rejected, and he had to settle for the role of a monastery servant. Despite his disappointment, he decided to accept this offer, and taking the name Brother Lawrence, he joined the monastery as a kitchen skivvy and there he was to stay for the rest of his life.

As time passed however the monks began to notice something different about this large, clumsy kitchen assistant.... And that was that he lived in near permanent joy, radiating God's love and peace in everything he did.

This joy was so exceptional that eventually the life of this kitchen porter came to the attention of the Archbishop of Paris who then arranged for Brother Lawrence's teachings to be written down for future generations, and the book that resulted, the Practice of the Presence of God, has remained a Christian classic for the 350 years since.

There is so much in this little book and whilst it's not an easy read, it is at least very short!,... I would therefore like to end by summarising just a few of Brother Lawrence's thoughts that might help us find God's still, small voice of calm and

experience the beauty of his peace and presence through the earthquakes, winds, fires and other distractions of everyday life.

Central to Brother Lawrence experiencing the presence of God, was that he saw no separation between the spiritual and the mundane. His secret, he explained, was that he looked to be thankful for God's help and love in absolutely everything that he did and therefore he saw every small task – even scrubbing the burnt saucepans – as an opportunity to show his love and gratitude to God.

His goal was to find the joy of living in God's company throughout the day, no matter what he was doing, and to make that a habit for his whole life.

And this he achieved, finding ever deeper joy from the simple knowledge that he had God's constant attention and company and, in response to what he had received, he turned everything he did- including scrubbing those dirty pans - into an act of love and worship for the God in whose presence he did it.

Now this may seem a rather unrealistic goal to many of us and unfortunately we don't have time now to explore all of his insights and principles, so, if you are able it is certainly worth trying to do this in your own time, but even if you can't do that, I think that Brother Lawrence still challenges us to just start from where we are now - to find time to stop and focus, not on doing things, but on the character and the presence of God. And to do this believing that God is a present God, who longs for us to know his closeness and experience the difference his companionship can make to us in every moment. And if we practice that, then bit by bit we may just find a little bit of peace and joy that Brother Lawrence found in his kitchen, that our prayer becomes more than just something we do, but something we live and we may just find ourselves loving, serving and praising God a little more. As John Greenleaf Whittier says:

in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence, praise.

We are now going to sing the hymn again and then say a prayer together, called the covenant prayer. It was written by John Wesley and although not specifically about contemplation, it is a prayer about surrendering to God and choosing him above all else, and this ultimately is the principle behind living in God's presence and the principle behind all that we have explored through Hymns We Love. It is quite a challenging prayer, and therefore after the hymn, Pippa will read it through once, so you can hear what is in it. If you are then

happy to say the words, Pippa will read it again and you can pray along with her. But first let's listen again to *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*.

Closing Prayer – THE COVENANT PRAYER

*I am no longer my own but yours.
put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'*

Amen