

10th January 2021

Hearsall at Home

Hello and welcome to the Hearsall at Home podcast.

My name is David Sutcliffe and I am the minister at Hearsall Baptist Church,
Coventry in the UK.

We hope that you will listen to our service podcasts either on a Sunday morning, or
at another time and you will join us as we worship, sing, pray and reflect on the
scriptures.

People around the world, around the UK and in our own City are joining us and I
want to give a special welcome to people who are listening for the first time, you are
very welcome today.

Visit our church website where you can find a written copy of each podcast, and
Bible study notes on the theme of my weekly talk.

Occasionally we will be welcoming guest speakers to give their perspective on the
scriptures for that week and we hope that you will find every episode a blessing.

Remember to subscribe if you would like to be notified of each new episode.

If you are listening this morning, our time of Sunday morning fellowship is on Zoom
from 11:30am.

Please go to our home page for meeting link:

Hearsallbaptist.org

Order of Service, 10th January 2021

Elements of Life

Call to Worship

Genesis 1: 1 - 5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.

Creation begins and continues in God. Let's worship God now in our opening song, a new one to me at least, *Light of the World*.

Song **Light of the World** (O Jesus, Son of God, so full of grace and truth)

Verse 1

O Jesus, Son of God, so full of grace and truth,
The Father's saving Word, so wonderful are You,
The angels longed to see, and prophets searched to find
The glory we have seen revealed.

You shone upon the earth but who will understand?
You came unto your own but who will recognise?
Your birth was prophesied, for you were the Messiah
Who came and walked upon the earth. Your glory we have seen,
The one and only King, and now you're living in our hearts.

Chorus

Light of the world, Light of the world,
Light of the world, You shine upon us.
Light of the world, Light of the world,
Light of the world, You shine upon us.

Verse 3

In you all things were made and nothing without you;
In heaven and on earth all things are held in you
And yet you became flesh, living as one of us
Under the shadow of the cross, where through the blood you shed,
You have made peace again - Peace for the world that God so loves.

Chorus

And yet you became flesh, living as one of us
Under the shadow of the cross, where through the blood you shed,
You have made peace again - Peace for the world that God so loves.

Chorus

Light of the world, Light of the world,
Light of the world, You shine upon us.

Psalm 29

I am going to read the powerful words of Psalm 29. You'll find them in our service sheet, if you'd like to say them along with me.

Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name;
worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness.

3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,

the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
4 The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
6 He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.
7 The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.
8 The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;
the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
9 The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'

10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King for ever.
11 The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.

We think today about the elements of life and now we pray the words of St Francis'
Canticle of the Sun...

The Canticle of the Sun

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
all praise is yours, all glory, honour and blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong;
no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name.

We praise you, Lord, for all your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom you give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
of you Most High, he bears your likeness.

We praise you, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.
We praise you, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,
fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which you cherish all that you have made.

We praise you, Lord, for Sister Water,
so useful, humble, precious and pure.

We praise you, Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night.
He is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

We praise you, Lord, for Sister Earth,
who sustains us
with her fruits, coloured flowers, and herbs.

We praise and bless you, Lord, and give you thanks,
and serve you in all humility.

The Lord's prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

In God's hands are the heights of the mountains and the depths of the earth. We
praise him in the words of our next hymn....

Hymn (BPW 36) **Come Worship God**

Come, worship God who is worthy of honour,
enter his presence with thanks and a song!
He is the rock of his people's salvation,
to whom our jubilant praises belong.

Ruled by his might are the heights of the mountains,
held in his hands are the depths of the earth;
his is the sea, his the land, for he made them,
King above all gods, who gave us our birth.

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture;
he is our maker, and to him we pray.
Gladly we kneel in obedience before him;
great is the God whom we worship this day!

Now let us listen, for God speaks among us,
open our hearts and receive what he says:
peace be to all who remember his goodness,
trust in his word and rejoice in his ways!

I'm delighted to introduce our dear sister, Jane Chan, as she brings her thoughts in this week's Doors Ajar.

Hi everyone! It's me, Jane. Thank you David for inviting me to this week's Doors Ajar. Hope you're all doing well and keeping warm. Today I'd like to give you a few updates and to let you know a little bit more about me :)

(Tell us about what work you're doing at the moment)

December last year marked my first year since i joined National Grid as a network modeller. I will try not to go into too much technical details about what I am doing. I am currently working on two main projects: the main one involves analysing the accuracy of modelling assumptions of our assets in the network, updating any changes I find in our modelling software and writing a programme to automate that

process. This has been particularly challenging for me as I had little coding experience prior to this project and I am the first person to carry out this kind of analyses but I am so grateful for this great learning opportunity and the exposure I get through working with different teams. I also became the technical secretary for a newly formed strategy group across the whole business, last November, which gives me a lot of opportunities to reach out to different departments and drive conversations around innovative solutions the teams have for the business.

(Are you working from home, or do you go to the office sometimes?)

So since before the first lockdown in March last year, I've been working from home, mostly in the dining room, sometimes on my bed.

(Where are you from and how often do you see your family? Were you raised as a Christian?)

So now I'm going to talk a little bit about myself. I'm born and raised in Hong Kong, a very small city in China although we are very different culturally from mainland China due to British colonisation in the past and expats from all around the world we attract for business. I was born in a Christian family and have been going to church regularly since I was a baby. My parents have always taught God's words to my sister and I. I've also learnt from them to walk righteously in God. I have this wooden plaque on my bedside table which my mum sent to me through the post two years ago. On the plaque it says: "love will put God first, forgive offences, encourage and build up, speak the truth, persevere in hard times, practice humility, be patient and kind, serve others, always protect and cast out fear." There are also Bible verses written underneath each action. I really like this plaque as it is a good reminder for my daily life so that the words I say and the actions I do may glorify Him.

(How did Christmas turn out for you this year?)

Christmas was quite unusual as it was for many of us. I was originally planning to spend it with my school friend and her family in Wales like I had been every year for the past 6 years but my plan changed last minute and I spent Christmas day at Orane and Uche's instead which was very nice as it's been a while since I socialised

with someone other than Fran, Seb and Polyphony, physically (I'm not complaining by the way haha. Being able to live with them during this pandemic has made it a lot less miserable). And on Boxing day, we had our Christmas dinner at Okehampton which we were very pleased with how the food turned out, especially the turkey.

(What are your hopes and fears for 2021?)

My hopes for this year are more effective solutions to combat this virus to be found, so fewer people will suffer from it and that we may all go back to church and catch up every Sunday like we used to. Also, more awareness about social injustices around the world to be raised so that we can take actions to build a better world together, and personally, it'd be for me to travel to Hong Kong to see my family, especially my grandparents.

(Do you have any message for the fellowship at Hearsall?)

Last but not least, I'd like to read a message from a card my mum wrote to me back in 2018 when I just graduated from uni:

May you start every day with a prayer, choose grace when treating others, have faith and courage while facing challenges and finally rejoice always. God bless.

Thanks so much Jane for bringing those words to us.

Offering

Let's remember now the joy of giving. Thanks to everyone who's able to give to the church in these difficult times. We pray together.

Lord, we respect one another. Some are blessed with wealth; some are finding times hard. Take whatever gifts are fitting from us and use them to bless our world. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Let's sing again and this time we share in another new song, *Creation sings the Father's song*:

Creation Sings the Father's Song

Verse 1

Creation sings the Father's song;
He calls the sun to wake the dawn
And run the course of day
Till evening falls in crimson rays,
His fingerprints in flakes of snow,
His breath upon this spinning globe.
He charts the eagle's flight,
Commands the new-born baby's cry.

Chorus

Hallelujah!

Let all creation stand and sing,

Hallelujah!

Fill the earth with songs of worship;

Tell the wonders of creation's King.

Verse 2

Creation gazed upon His face,
The ageless One in time's embrace,
Unveiled the Father's plan
Of reconciling God and man.
A second Adam walked the earth,
Whose blameless life would break the curse,
Whose death would set us free
To live with Him eternally.

Chorus

Verse 3

Creation longs for His return
When Christ shall reign upon the earth.
The bitter wars that rage

Are birth pains of a coming age.
When He renews the land and sky,
All heaven will sing and earth reply
With one resplendent theme:
The glory of our God and King!

Chorus x 2

Hallelujah!

Let all creation stand and sing,

Hallelujah!

Fill the earth with songs of worship;

Tell the wonders of creation's King.

Ending

Fill the earth with songs of worship;

Tell the wonders of creation's King.

CCLI Song # 5333798

Keith Getty | Kristyn Getty | Stuart Townend

Our prayers this week are kindly prepared by our dear sister, Louise.

Prayers of Intercession

As we gather separately, but united in Christ, we offer our prayers to you, O Lord, our God of love, grace and mercy.

We pray for our world, which has been entrusted to us and we pray for a world of peace, love and kindness so that people do not have to live in fear, injustice or poverty. We thank you, Lord, for those campaigning for immediate political change on environmental issues, and an understanding that each of us can play a part.

Let us, during this coming week, remember to pray for those areas of the world which may be on our hearts. We pray for those suffering from the effects of flooding – across the world and here in Britain.

Here in the UK, as we enter our third lockdown, we pray for those whose lives have been affected by the pandemic. For those who are suffering the effects of the virus, for those who have lost loved ones and for those suffering other conditions whose operations and treatments have been cancelled.

We pray for NHS staff who are working tirelessly: the doctors, nurses and also those often unseen – technicians and engineers setting up and maintaining equipment, those tackling rotas to allow staff time to rest and recharge – all those striving to treat patients with limited resources.

We are thankful that a vaccination programme is being rolled out and pray that sufficient volunteers will be found for a swift delivery of the vaccine.

We continue to pray for those experiencing poverty and spiralling debt as a result of job losses caused by the Covid19 lockdown. We pray for a recovery that is creative, green and safe, as our country seeks to find a new way forward rather than return to how it was before. We pray for any we know personally who are suffering as a result of redundancy or shortened hours.

As our education services, once again, are having to close their doors to learners, we pray for teachers and learners as they make the transition to online learning and pray for parents who may struggle to meet the demands of employers while having their children at home. We pray for children missing the companionship of friends. We pray that the government will give a clear strategy for the assessment of learning so that university, college and employment opportunities are not missed, and young people will be reassured that they will achieve meaningful qualifications.

We pray for the church, that we would be unflinching in supporting those suffering poverty and disadvantage in whatever way we can, bringing love, kindness, grace and hope for those who are most in need. We give thanks and pray for Coventry City Mission, Carriers of Hope and Foodbanks, as they work to support people who need their help, especially with the complications caused by social distancing.

And we pray for each other, in our church family here at Hearsall – and those beyond. Let us during this coming week remember to pray for those known to us who may be on our hearts.

Lord of all hopefulness, we commit all these prayers to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer.

And as the people of God, we say together - Amen

Thanks Louise for those prayers. We hear our Bible readings now from Acts and also from Mark.

Bible Readings:

Acts 19: 1 - 7

Paul in Ephesus

19 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'

They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

³ So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?'

'John's baptism,' they replied.

⁴ Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.'⁵ On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

Mark 1: 1 - 11

John the Baptist prepares the way

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way' –

³ 'a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.”

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’

The baptism and testing of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

John called people to prepare for the coming Messiah. Let’s do the same as we sing,
Jesus, be the centre.

Song Jesus be the centre

Jesus, be the centre,
Be my source, be my Light,
Jesus.

Jesus, be the centre,
Be my hope, be my song,
Jesus.

Be the fire in my heart,
Be the wind in these sails,
Be the reason that I live,
Jesus, Jesus.

Jesus, be my vision,
Be my path, be my guide,
Jesus.

Jesus, be the centre,
Be my source, be my Light,
Jesus.

Be my source, be my Light,
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

And now, O Lord, speak your living word through my humble thoughts. For Jesus's sake. Amen.

Sermon

Elements of Life

Yesterday I watched a video shot at St George's hospital in London. Nurses spoke of having the worst shift of their careers. Staff talked of bursting into tears, and of going home and weeping because of the sheer overload of work they are expected to deal with. Not just elderly people, but people in their 40s, 30s and 20s are in intensive care units and dying from covid. We are on alert level 5, which means the National Health Service is at material risk of becoming overwhelmed.

From our readings today I want to point out three qualities that the church needs, and that the country needs, at this time of national crisis. The qualities are **resilience, solidarity and vision.**

In Mark's gospel, John just appears in the desert dressed like a nomad, foraging for food and making his own clothes, looking like an archetypal prophet. He likely had dealings with the Essene community of strict religious Jews who lived in this region and had learnt how to pray, fast and scrape together a living in a very sparse environment. John certainly had learnt resilience.

But he applied his experience of living in the wild place to the realities of life in Jerusalem and Judea. His resilience had taught him something that mattered about

life in the city and life on the farm. Crowds come out for some kind of personal religious ceremony in the Jordan river.

It was a call to change, a change called repentance in religious language. John's eccentric lifestyle was not one that he could expect everyone to follow. But his resilience had taught him that everyone needed to go deeper and think through the direction of their lives.

Repent - turn around - turn back to God - and be immersed in the Jordan river, as a vivid physical experience of the new life you intend to live. Turn away from sin - from selfishness, from ignoring the needs of the poor and the sick - and go deep and go broad in love. Get ready for the coming Messiah.

Resilience is needed in the church right now. We need to go deep. Lockdown is a time for *character* to be shaped. It's a time to make do in the desert, to improvise. Christians are called to be models of resilience.

We are not to throw up our hands in despair or cynically dismiss every initiative we hear about. We are to avoid the bog of self-pity. We have heard in our holy book that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord: not death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation. And certainly not covid. Now is the time to go deeper into our faith and prove the truth of these words. Christians are resilient people.

So a personal word for you: How is God shaping your character through this testing time? What qualities is God drawing from you? What repentance is needed in your heart? This dark and frightening time is also an opportune time for personal spiritual growth.

People sometimes pay good money and allocate several days to go away on some kind of a personal retreat. Well, perhaps God invites you on a kind of personal retreat now. A time to pray and to grow. A time to dig deep and learn resilience.

Next, **solidarity**. John points to one following him - one whose sandals he is not fit to tie up; one who is greater than he. This Greater One will not only immerse a body in

river water; he will immerse a whole life in the Holy Spirit; he will submerge people in the very presence of God.

Yet, without further explanation, this Greater One comes over from Nazareth in Galilee and is himself baptised by John! This extraordinary God-man does not stand outside the human experience yelling from the touchline that we must try harder. He enters our human condition in solidarity.

We could wonder *why* the Son of God wants to undergo John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And here is at least part of the answer: Jesus joins us in our place of need. He walks **with** us in our desire to live life better.

I used to work with people with learning difficulties as a job trainer. Once I remember supporting a young disabled man as he developed his skills washing up at the back of a carvery pub. As he began, I had to don an apron and get my own hands in the sink with his as he learnt how to scrub the huge greasy pots and pans required for cooking roast dinners. For a time I had to literally get my hands dirty to show this young man what was required.

Jesus is not afraid to get his hands dirty. He stands alongside us and puts his hands into the washing up of our lives. Whatever you may be struggling with in this pandemic, Jesus is standing right by you.

He entered the waters of baptism to make that much clear to us all. Whatever you may be working through, Jesus works through it **with** you. He brings **solidarity** to your situation.

And that same solidarity should characterise a whole fellowship. Our ambition for ourselves as a church is to live out texts that tell us that when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer too.

To return again to another stage of my previous career, I became a national learning officer for Mencap, part of a team of about a dozen people delivering staff training right across the country.

Now sometimes I might be delivering a training session at Bodmin in Cornwall or at Cardigan Bay in west Wales or at Chiswick in London, but I never felt alone.

Why? Because we had a brilliant manager called Denise. Denise recruited staff first of all on one criterion: could she see this person fitting into her team? We met once a month in Birmingham - occasionally we met at the Village Hotel in Coventry, just half a mile from where I now live.

But Denise would say, knowing we would be stationed for most of the time in far flung corners of the kingdom, that *distance is only a problem if you let it be a problem*. If you are unsure about something, she'd say, if you're feeling lonely, if you've had a terrible day and are sitting in some dive of a hotel in the New Forest or some bland chain budget hotel in Sheffield - just pick up the phone. Care for each other, support each other. And so we did. And when we met at the Village hotel, or in Birmingham, it was with palpable joy that we saw each other.

So much so, that when I left that role and became a minister in Coventry, I found the solidarity I now knew with fellow ministers was frankly a pale shadow of the solidarity I had found with my training colleagues.

But we at Hearsall Baptist **are** one in Christ. We each belong. We are only a phone call, a WhatsApp message, a park walk, a letter, a prayer, away from each other. For us, as regards that sense of solidarity, lockdown is only a problem if we let it be a problem.

So: resilience and solidarity are essential for us to explore and experience right now. My third point was **vision**.

I like that random incident we heard from Acts 19, of the believers Paul found in Ephesus. Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptised? Er... we haven't even heard there IS a Holy Spirit! They had only received John's baptism - which, Paul explains in Luke's narrative, was a baptism of repentance, preparing the way for Jesus.

Well, Jesus baptised people in the Holy Spirit. Jesus experienced a deeper meaning at his water baptism. He saw heaven ripped open and a vision of something like a wild dove descending on him - a picture of the Holy Spirit. And he heard a voice declaring: *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*

Behind his experience of being dunked in a river was an encounter with the presence of God. Back in Acts 19, Paul prays for the believers he meets, that they too may encounter the Holy Spirit of God. It's easy to miss the visionary aspects of life. Right now, it's easy to see only doors closed, activities forbidden, risks rising, threats looming and to leave it at that.

But here's the thing: Jesus is **not** subject to lockdown! You may not be able to attend an in-person church service. You may be missing your hugs. The pastor is generally not permitted into your lounge... But no locked door keeps Jesus out!

So the deeper meaning for the believer here is that this is a time of encountering God in the privacy of our own houses, or in the beauty of our country walks, or in the secret thoughts of our own hearts. And more broadly, love, beauty, art and truth are still possible during a lockdown.

God is entirely available to you right now. Lockdown is providing a place where we might, at last, be entirely available to him. You could keep a spiritual journal, learn how to pray as you walk your dog, enjoy new worship songs on YouTube, find an online choir, pray for the staff of the National Health Service, learn Christian meditation, read a spiritual classic, work your way through a book of the Bible, open a prayer diary, plant garden bulbs as an act of hope, find an online prayer partner and pray on video chat. As regards solidarity and spiritual growth, lockdown is only a problem if you let it be a problem.

God saturates everything. Water is not just water, but speaks of life being cleansed, of spiritual thirst being quenched... Air is not just air, but carries the voice of God and speaks of spirit. Earth is not just earth but is, in the words of David Attenborough, a perfect planet and the stuff of which our bodies are made. And even fire is not just fire, but speaks of spiritual purity, and of the destruction that allows new life to grow. The thunder, the lightning, the forest, the cedar, the flood of mighty waters: all, for the believer, cry GLORY!

The elements that allow us to live, all whisper of the presence of God. Let's not be simple materialists, reducing everything to the physical level, and missing the spiritual point as the Ephesian believers had done.

So for us as a church, lockdown is a time for **resilience**, for **solidarity** and for renewed **vision**. But how does this connect with what's going on at the University Hospital in Walsgrave?

First, many of us are not being asked very much at all. We are being asked to stay home and to respect the rules of lockdown. This is an act of solidarity with the whole nation and especially with the nurses and doctors and other health care staff who are in danger of being overwhelmed by the rise in covid cases.

The least we can do is respect the rules and do everything we can to halt the spread of this virus. We haven't the time for silly conspiracy theories. This is a moment for national solidarity with the NHS. Yes, we must hold our politicians to account. Yes, it's a free country and other perspectives must be heard. But to doubt the real dangers of covid is absurd, callous and unhelpful. This is a time for solidarity with all who are sick and with all who care for them. And these healthcare workers are pleading with us - stay home, avoid mixing, wear a mask, wash your hands, keep your distance. As Christians, we of all people, should be doing these things as an act of solidarity.

I have spoken of resilience. *We* need resilience? Well it's the nurses working for twelve hours caring for many more patients than usual, losing patients they had fought hard to save, going home exhausted and in tears, and having to go in again several hours later to repeat the whole experience: these are the people who are truly called on to dig deep and show resilience. You may be going through an especially tough time in your personal circumstances right now. But, at least for me, the resilience I need in order to stay home and not spread the virus is as nothing compared with the resilience needed by a doctor working in intensive care. In solidarity we need to do everything we can to support the resilience of our inspiring health care workers.

And we need to share something of vision, too. Yes, as Christians, we long to bear

witness to the amazing grace of God we experience through Jesus Christ. But the expression of our vision will often be much broader, more elemental.

We know that life is worth living. We know that things can get better as well as worse. We know that every life is precious. We know that people, made in the image of God, are capable of wonderful things. We know that community is better than isolation. We know that light is better than darkness, and that beauty can be found in surprising places. We know that hope is an eternal spring, that love conquers hatred and we know that God - however people might or might not think of God - we know that God is always with us, and this is forever at the heart of our Christmas celebrations and of our gospel proclamation.

We can inject that vision and hope not only by sticking to the rules but also, as a church, continuing to do whatever we can to support the struggles of the wider community. Let's consider further food bank collections. Let's plug in to local support networks and do what we can to help. Let's remind people that you don't need to sit in a special building to pray and find God. Let's be resilient, let's show solidarity, let's bring vision, let's be God's people in the particular slice of history we find ourselves in right now.

Our closing song likens the soul to a sponge soaking up Jesus' way of life, a drum resonating to the rhythm of God's heart, a boat coursing on God's river, a child embraced in God's arms, and a star shining as a sign of the king. Consider how God would shape your soul as we sing these words together...

Song Let my soul be as a sponge Words by David Sutcliffe; Music by Martin Prue

Verse 1

Let my soul be as a sponge
soaking up the water
of your gentle way of life.
Let my soul be as a drum
forever resonating
with the rhythm of your heart.

Chorus

Your parenting brings confidence!

Your kingship perfect harmony!

Your will is shared prosperity!

Your bread is baked for everyone!

Your pardon cascades liberty!

Oh rescue me from counterfeits:

I choose to live your way!

I choose to live your way!

Verse 2

Let my soul be as a boat

coursing on the current

of the river of your love.

Let my soul be as a child

tenderly enfolded

in the cradle of your arms.

Chorus

Verse 3

Let my soul be as a star

shining as a portent

of the coming of the king!

Let my soul be truly wild,

energised to labour

for the way things ought to be.

Chorus

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;

And the love of God;

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Be with us all, evermore. Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you

Wherever he may send you;

May he guide you through the wilderness;

Protect you through the storm;

May he bring you home rejoicing

At the wonders he has shown you;

May he bring you home rejoicing

Once again into our doors