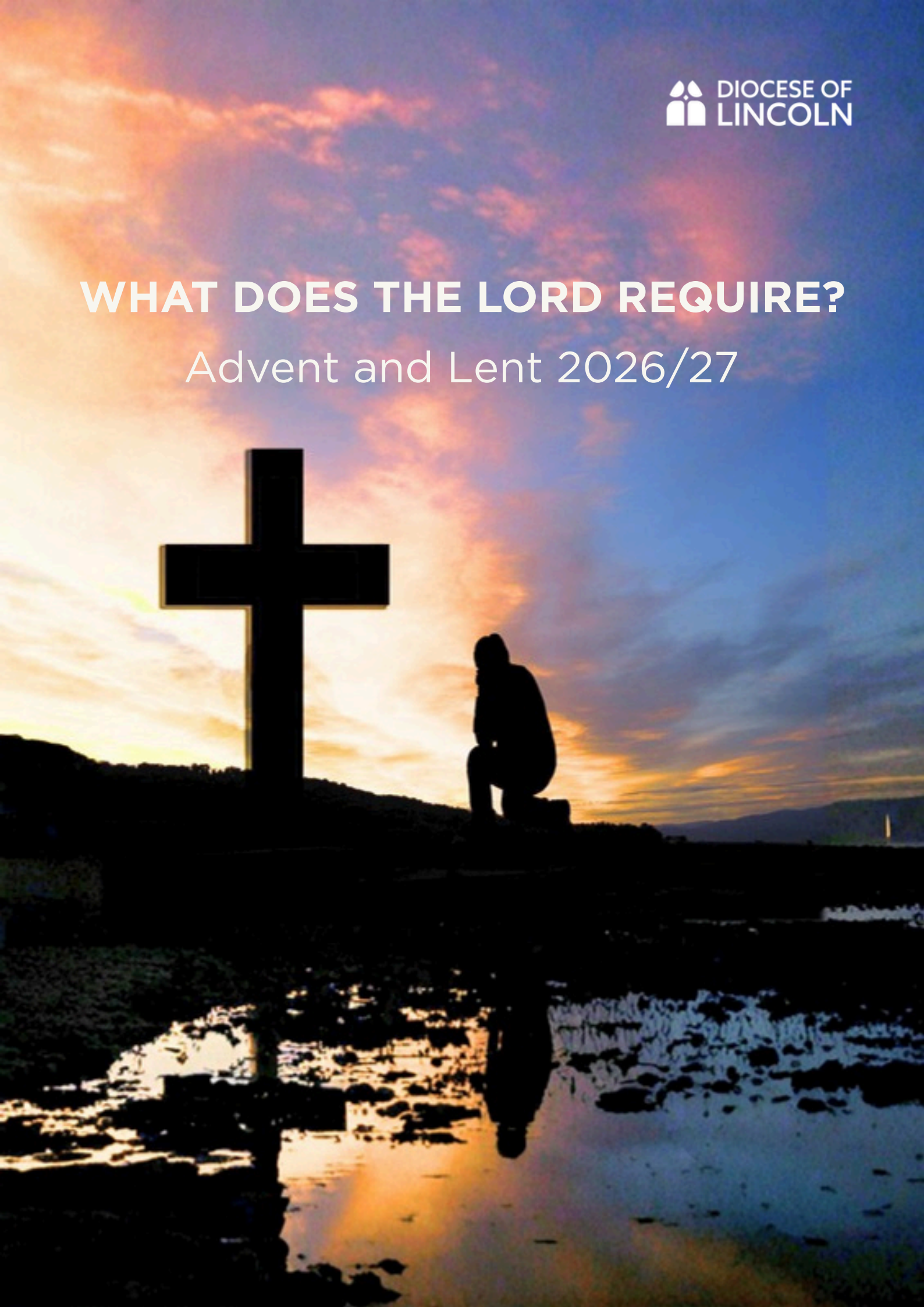
DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

# WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?

## Advent and Lent 2026/27



# How to Use This Course

Please feel free to use these materials in whatever way is most helpful to you. They are designed to be flexible and there is no single 'right' way of using them. The following general suggestions may nevertheless help.

## If You Are Leading A Group...

Consider deciding in advance how you want to 'present' each section of material.

- Which sections will you read aloud yourself? This may be best for the Introduction;
- Which should a group member read aloud? This can be a good idea for Dwelling in the Word and Testimony. Consider asking two or three people beforehand.
- Which should the group read quietly to themselves? This might include 'A Bit of Background' and 'How, When and Where'.

The main sections of the material are intended to spark discussion and reflection.

- Timings need to be flexible and respond to what arises in conversation, but a good plan to begin with is:
- 'First Thoughts' and 'Final Thoughts' – 5 minutes each;
- 'Dwelling in the Word' – 20-30 minutes;
- 'A Bit of Background' – 10 minutes, mainly for question or comment rather than discussion;
- 'How, When and Where' – 10-15 minutes;
- 'Testimony' – 15-20 minutes.

The Introduction and Opening and Closing Prayers should not be rushed but do not need to be discussed. Overall, you should allow at least 90 minutes for the whole session but no more than two hours.

Dwelling in the Word is a form of Lectio Divina, an ancient tradition of prayerful reading of Scripture.

Ideally you should have the passage read aloud twice, with some silence in between each reading, before turning to the questions that follow it. You should conclude this section with a third reading of the Bible passage. This is a good opportunity to involve other voices.

## If You Are Doing The Course On Your Own...

Set aside the time to engage with each week's session. This could be in one long session, or several shorter ones. Try to make sure that there is minimal risk of being interrupted.

Consider reading some of the material out loud. This may be particularly valuable in the Dwelling in the Word and Testimony sections. Although it may feel a little awkward, reading out loud can help you to engage with the words in a different way. This might be particularly helpful with the words of Scripture.

For those sections intended for discussion and reflection, have a notebook to hand and jot down your ideas. Try not to rush this. If you have questions, write these down too and make a commitment to ask someone you trust about them later.

Above all, take your time! You could read a week's session in less than 15 minutes, but the value of the material will be far greater if you give time and space for prayerful reflection and make a record of any ideas that occur to you.

# Introduction

When Gabriel appeared to Mary asking that she pledge her life to God by becoming the mother of Jesus, she replied, "**Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."** (**Luke 1:38**). These are profound words. Perhaps we try, at least, to echo them in our own experience of God, when He breaks into our lives, asking something extraordinary of us. Like Mary, a young woman, and Isaiah, the prophet (**Isaiah 6:8**) Samuel, the small boy (**1 Samuel 3:4**) and Ananias, a disciple of Christ (**Acts 9:10**) we can say our own 'Yes' to God's call in our lives. But, to use a verse from Micah, what is it, exactly, that God requires of us as we go about His business? (**Micah 6:8**).

In this eight-week course, spread over Advent and Lent, we explore what God's expectations of us are as we fulfil our call, our baptismal vocation (we all have at least one) and reflect on what sacrifice means for us as we follow in the Way of Christ, what the cost of our 'Yes' is, and, importantly, what it isn't.



During three weeks of Advent we will look at God's commandment to love others and ourselves, to reflect on His will for our lives, for the communities of which we are a part, and for the world He created. During five weeks of Lent, we focus more fully on the summary of God's expectations of us in Micah, that we 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God'. How do we apply ourselves to that task without becoming overwhelmed? How are we able, as individuals and in community, to enable the wellbeing and flourishing of all?



# Walk Humbly - Wellbeing as a beloved child of God

## Introduction

As human beings created by a loving God, we are truly blessed. We are God's image bearers, 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (**Psalm 139:14**) each one of us, a beloved child of God for whom He seeks the best in life – an abundant life, life in all its fullness (**John 10:10**). Rooted in Him, the one who brought us into being and gives us meaning and purpose, we are called to a life of discipleship, humbly serving God, exhibiting loving kindness to our neighbours, and caring justly for the whole of creation, in such a way that all flourish and thrive.

## Opening Prayer

Almighty God, You gave us life to enjoy to the full. Help us to care for ourselves in body, mind and spirit, to rest in You, and to be channels of blessing to others. May we remain close to Your Word, better to work fruitfully for the glory of Your Kingdom. Amen.

## First Thoughts

**Who comes first in your life?**
Given you're attending an Advent course, you're likely to respond with the answer - God.

**Who would you list next?** Family and friends? Maybe a pet? And after that? Where do **your** needs feature on the list?

Spend a few moments thinking about the priorities in your life – relationships, work, church, social and community life. Where do you rank your own wellbeing?

## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

"When the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question to test Him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (**Matthew 22:34-40**)

## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?

What does loving God with all your heart, soul and mind mean to you? How does embodying this message in your life 'look'?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group. **Read the passage out loud one final time.**



# A Bit of Background

There are many bible passages that speak of sacrificial service. As disciples, we may use those stories, especially the life of Jesus, as a template for our own. We are familiar with the scenes of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, teaching vast crowds, healing the sick, or taking time to speak to the little chap up a tree, or a woman at the well. Busy, busy, busy. These images prompt us to offer our own sacrificial service, in whatever baptismal vocation God has called us to, placing the needs of others ever before our own.

But are we missing something? Think of the second commandment in Matthew. Do we fall into the trap of giving complete emphasis to loving our neighbour, and let the words, 'as yourself', slip away unheard? We are indeed called to love our neighbour, (remembering 'neighbour' encompasses a broad catchment), but we shouldn't forget that we love others to the same extent we love ourselves. We are commanded to self-care, something entirely different from selfishness, and we do this first and foremost because we are God's beloved children. Following from that, but not topping it, we care for ourselves so we are fit to fulfil our service to others without being overwhelmed.



Would we be more disciplined in obeying this commandment if it had been written differently? 'You shall love yourself and love your neighbour just as much.' Or 'You shall love yourself and love your neighbour to that same degree.' To walk humbly with God we must honour the commandments He has given, applying them to our lives. In recognising that we too have needs, and limitations, we may better rely upon God's strength to see us through, rather than our own.



**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas before moving on to the next section. Jot down some ideas.**



# Offering a Sustainable Sacrifice –

## How, When and Where?

Jesus modelled more than just sacrificial service, He also modelled self-care. There are many times we read of Jesus eating, even breakfast (**John 21:12**) and He stopped at the well to have a drink to be refreshed (**John 4:7**). He attended to his physical needs. How often do you miss breakfast, or fail to keep hydrated? Jesus maintained friendships, the most well-known being with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (**Luke 10: 38-42**) the family He loved (**John 11:5**). He needed to be with people with whom He could relax, enjoying their company.

How often do the pleasures of your family life and friendships get pushed aside? Jesus took time out for respite, going to quiet, deserted places to "rest awhile" (**Mark 6:31**) trying to escape the crowds (**Luke 4:42**). He even slept when His disciples feared for their lives in the storm (**Matthew 8:23–27**). And of course Jesus attended to His spiritual life, setting Himself apart to pray (**Matthew 14:23**), even when His disciples were hunting for Him (**Mark 1:35**). Though crowds wanted to hear Him, to be healed by Him, and though his closest co-workers and friends were looking for Him, He stopped everything to pray. When is your rest and prayer time prioritised? Jesus did all this in order to be able to fulfil His call.



## Testimony



*By The Reverend Jackie Johnson, Wellbeing & Continuing Ministerial Development Officer for the Diocese of Lincoln*

There was a point in parish ministry when I felt utterly overwhelmed with the tasks of office; one more request would break the camel's back.

At the lowest point of fatigue there was a knock at my door. My heart sank. I couldn't face another person; so there, standing in the vicarage hallway, not daring to move to my right or left, I'd be spotted through the sitting and dining room windows, and praying the person wouldn't peek through the letter box and call me, as had happened before, 'Just in case you hadn't heard the bell.', I stood and hid.

For years I felt guilty. Then one day, as if these verses had suddenly just landed into the pages of scripture, I read of Jesus hiding! (**Mark 7:24** and **John 12:36b**). I can't tell you of the relief, knowing that even Jesus needed space in which to BE, to breathe, rest, refuel, renew. If He needed that, how much more do I and all of His disciples, when the going gets tough. My offering to God needs to be a living sacrifice (**Romans 12:1**) a sustainable sacrifice. God, (and the Church of England), has invested a great deal in me, and it would be absurd to think I should work in His name to the point of being burned-out, spent. Rather, I need to be fit for a lifetime of playing my part in building God's kingdom which involves not working in my own strength, but walking humbly with Him, shaping my life to meet His expectations rather my own or those of others.

**Share reactions to the meditation.**



## Final Thoughts

Think about what sacrifice means in your life as a disciple and baptismal vocation?

What does the Lord require of you? How do you walk humbly with God? How can you flourish and thrive, to live the life God wants for you?

## Closing Prayer

Faithful God, thank you for the precious gift of life. May we cherish it, maintain it, flourish and thrive in it. May we love and care for ourselves as well as You want us to love and care for our neighbours. Help us to do justly - to nurture and protect our wellbeing and that of our neighbours. Help us to love mercy, to be kind - not pushing ourselves or others to unreasonable limits. And may we always walk humbly with You, our Lord. Amen.

**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas before moving on to the next section. Jot down some ideas.**

# Love Mercy, Be Kind -
## The Wellbeing of God's People



## Introduction

God cares passionately for us as individuals, and He also cares for us collectively, as the Body of Christ – the community of followers, the Church. We are commanded to love one another – our sisters and brothers in Christ in our churches, Partnerships, and far beyond. This is a commandment given us by Jesus (**John 13:34-35**). We express and embody that by:

- the way we work in partnership
- in the warmth of our welcome of each other and to newcomers through our inclusivity;
- through our abundant generosity, of kindness, time, resources
- in our commitment to sharing the Word of God and making new disciples
- our energy and passion for God's mission.

God wants us to flourish and thrive as the Body of Christ, and to shine as a light in the world to the glory of His name.

### Opening Prayer

Almighty God, when we are tired, anxious, burdened by personal and vocational responsibilities, help us, as we work together in Your name, to practise our faith in a way that draws others in. May we reflect Your love, Your mercy, kindness, and all the gifts of the Spirit, modelling healthy community life, not perfect – but fruitful and flourishing. Amen.

### First Thoughts

What would a picture of a flourishing church look like? How would you depict or describe a healthy church?

What does God want for/of His people working together in His name?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.







## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving silence between each reading.

"But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and He will do this."
(**1 Thessalonians 5: 12-24**)

## Revisit

**What stands out for you in this passage?**

" … may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." How does this verse reflect God's commitment to the wellbeing of His followers and His Church? What links do you see in this passage to the idea of being a flourishing Christian community?

How does being encouraged by someone make you feel, and is there someone who would benefit from encouragement from you? How might you encourage someone outside of the church, or a newcomer, to accept the gift God has for them of life in all its fulness?

Spend some time thinking about these questions.

**Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group. Read the passage out loud one final time.**



# A Bit of Background

Any community - family, social group, or even church, isn't on its best behaviour all of the time; Paul's letters to the Corinthians indicate that Christians have always fallen short when it comes to working together. On hearing of some church dispute, how often have we said, in a cynical or sarcastic tone and with a raised eye-brow, 'See how these Christians do love one another', (attributed to the early Christian writer Tertullian)? And how many people have you heard say, 'I'm not going to that church. They're all hypocrites!'

We may, often, exhibit our human imperfections, yet we are called to a higher way of being. God tasks us to nurture and uphold a radical relationship with each other that doesn't buckle under disagreement or dispute, but which demands we work towards finding a way to live and work together – in His name, for His people and creation. What we aim for is a love for each other, the quality of which, in spite of our most profound differences, speaks volumes about our commitment to following the way of Christ. This is what loving mercy means in action - seeing others through the compassionate eyes of God, walking in their shoes, forgiving, and seeking their wellbeing. In striving for that, we model something much needed in our world - a healthy, transformative community.

## Being a healthy, transformative community – How, When and Where?

No matter the size of your church community, God's expectation is that it shows kindness, compassion, empathy, support, which are markers of its health and wellbeing. We should aspire to be known and experienced as a church that is transformative, following whatever vocation God has called it to, whether that be a Festival, Community, Local Mission, or Key Mission Church.* Even those from a closing or closed church can display the spiritual fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control **(Galatians 5:22-23)**. The building may no longer host a congregation, but that doesn't stop former congregants fulfilling their Christian calling and remaining a beacon of mercy and hope.

The Church of England course, Pastoral Principles for Living and Learning Well Together (free to download here: churchofengland.org/about/governance/general-synod/structure/house-bishops/pastoral-principles ), helps church communities "to examine afresh their life and learning together in the face of difference and diversity."

Here, you think about what impairs relationships or creates barriers to churches being places of welcome and belonging, seeking ways of achieving shalom, peace, and nurturing unity, thereby being more able to flourish. Loving mercy and showing kindness is expected of us by God; after all, it's what we have experienced as individuals from God.

*For more information, please email the collegeofsthugh@lincoln.anglican.org

## Testimony

*By The Reverend Jackie Johnson, Wellbeing & Continuing Ministerial Development Officer for the Diocese of Lincoln*




Picture a group of people walking alongside you in your hour, or even long hours or months of need. Imagine them being non-judgmental, accepting, understanding, ready to bear your burden with you as you wished to share it, listening, crying with you, taking the strain of responsibilities you can't carry in this moment, encouraging and loving you, showing infinite patience, praying for you; and then, either consoling and comforting you in your ongoing torment or grief, or rejoicing with you when the anxiety, tension, and pressure lifts.

Such would be the markers of a community built on the message and commandments of Jesus. For those who experience such beneficence, there is no doubt from where the gifting comes – this is unmistakably the Body of Christ being and doing what it has been called to be and do. As someone who has encountered this firsthand, I know that living in the presence of those who act in this way is transformative - you feel the uplifting, restorative, and renewing power of Christ working in the situation, and you experience a hope that life can be different, fruitful; and the Body who have worked together with you and for you, are also blessed, for a mutual flourishing takes place.

This may not happen often in our church communities, but it's surely something to aim for!

**Share reactions to the meditation.**

## Final Thoughts

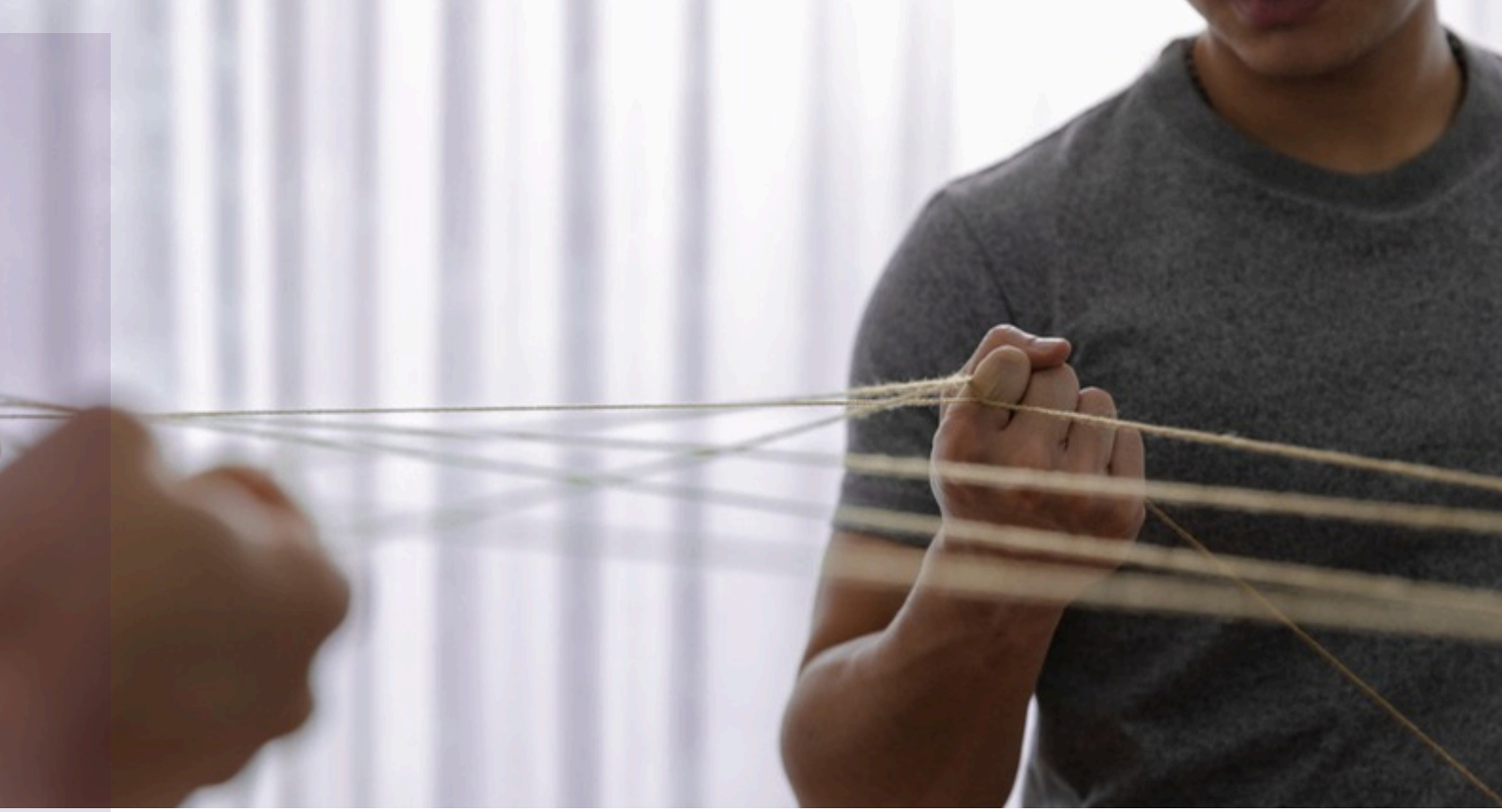
What do you think to the idea that we have perhaps raised expectations of ourselves, and lowered expectations of our community?

What does the Lord require of you and your church community to enable it to be a place of mercy, kindness, and flourishing for those who worship there and those who come into contact with you?

**Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.**

## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, bless us with sufficient faith in You to believe that, with You working through us, we can make a difference in the lives of those whom we meet. May we flourish as individuals, and collectively as the Body of Christ in this place. Amen.





# Do Justly –
## The Wellbeing of God's Creation

### Introduction

As human beings we are part of God's Creation; fellow creatures within an amazing, interconnected web of relationships which rest within the blessing of God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. When we see into the birth of galaxies, or wonder at the intricacies of a butterfly's wing, when we are quenched by the coolness of a light summer breeze, or nourished by the purring of a cat, we experience God's gift of undeserved grace. The shared common home in which our wellbeing lies, is, like us, fearfully and wonderfully made. Its equilibrium is also fearfully and wonderfully fragile, so God asks that our lives are lived in response to His gift, that our actions are inspired by His just ways.



### Opening Prayer

God of all Creation, we come together waiting for the return of longer days, for warmth from the sun, for life to spring up again from the ground. We thank You for placing us in Your world of amazing beauty, wonder and life, and we praise You that even in the darkest of nights the skies yet proclaim Your greatness and Your glory. May we open our eyes to see the work of Your hand in the turning of the seasons, in the being of every creature and in the shared breath of all that lives. Amen.

## First Thoughts

The Lord requires us to act justly. Talk of justice conjures up images of law enforcement, lawcourts and legal procedures. It might suggest human systems of processing crime and punishment. Ideas of justice might also lead us to reflect on rules, fairness, and equity. Yet the bible also presents some remarkable and surprising images of what it might be to live and act justly within God's creation, within His work of redeeming all things.

If you have time before the session, have a look through some of these passages: **Exodus 23:10-12, Psalm 33:4-8, Psalm 82:3, Hosea 2:16-23, Jeremiah 22:3, Matthew 23:23, Matthew 20:8-16**.

How do these readings characterise God's justice? What do you find joyful in this? What do you find challenging in this? Why? What might 'acting justly' look like for us, following God's example?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions.**
**Jot down some of your thoughts and share together.**



## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading. Allow your imagination to join in with the multitude of creatures.

"O Lord, how manifold are Your works!
In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great. There go the ships, and the Leviathan that You formed to sport in it.
These all look to You to give them their food in due season;
when You give to them, they gather it up;
when You open Your hand, they are filled with good things. When You hide Your face, they are dismayed;
when You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When You send forth Your spirit, they are created;
and You renew the face of the earth."
(**Psalm 104:24-30**)

## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?

How do you notice God interacting with creation?

What do you notice?

Which words or ideas resonate?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts and share together.**

**Read the passage out loud one final time.**



# A Bit of Background



**Psalm 104** is sometimes called the 'pearl of the psalter' – it is the writer's 'ecstatic celebration of God's dominion over the vast panorama of creation' (*The Book of Psalms, p362**). It paints a vivid picture of God's involvement in creation: earth, waters, constellations, animals, birds, trees, time, seasons and people. It contains echoes of the creation text found in **Genesis 1**, where through God's desire, intention and action all things come into being, and find their place, and are named 'Good'. Rather than being an ode to a lost or fallen world, the psalm is a hymn of praise to God's active and ongoing providence. It celebrates the perennial presence, omnipotence, and constancy of God's renewing action in creation – we just need to look.



If you have time before the session, read through the whole psalm, making a note of all God's actions. Notice what tense this psalm is written in. What do the verbs reveal to us about the way the writer understands the activity of God? Using the psalm as a template, how might you develop the text?

Yonder is the … (mountain/field/river/school etc.)
There goes the.....
When You ..... they …
..... and You renew the face of the earth.

**Spend a little time sharing these ideas with the group before moving on to the next section. Jot down any thoughts that come to mind as you listen.**

*The Book of Psalms' by Robert Alter. Published in 2007 by W.W. Norton and Company.

# Renewing the Face of the Earth

## How, When and Where?



**Psalm 104** also includes a note of caution – this harmoniously balanced order is vulnerable to human sin. What, then, is our work as Christians in moving away from that which despoils creation and closer to God's intentions? What is your lament at our breaking of creation? What is your prayer for God's renewal of the face of the earth?

As the contrasts come into mind between God's intentions for creation and our own destructive actions, we acknowledge our selfishness and lack of justice.

You might want to listen to or sing this hymn which reminds us that core to God's justice and forgiveness is mercy and kindness, revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
We have chosen, 'The Wideness of God's Mercy' by Frederick William Faber. The lyrics are below.

*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;*
*there's a kindness in His justice which is more than liberty....*
*There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;*
*there is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgement given.*

*For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind,*
*and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.*
*But we make His love too narrow by false limits of our own;*
*and we magnify His strictness with a zeal He would not own.*

*There is plentiful redemption through the blood that has been shed;*
*there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.*
*There is grace enough for thousands of new worlds as great as this;*
*there is room for fresh creations in that upper home of bliss.*

*If our love were but more simple, we should take Him at His word; and our lives would be all gladness in the joy of Christ our Lord."*

*Frederick William Faber (1814-1863)*



## Testimony

*By Canon Sarah Spencer, Mission & Discipleship Officer for the Diocese of Lincoln*

This year, I met a teenager, a kind, nature-loving person, who created a rather disquieting image. She painted a canvas where amidst a battle scene of smoke, destruction and scorched earth, skeletal figures rise, their desolate dry bones resurfacing from the ground in defiance.

As a parent, I admit to being perturbed by the bleakness of the subject matter, wondering what could lie behind the imagery. So we chatted together and she shared with me images of destruction in Israel and Gaza, Russia and Ukraine, the washed-up bodies of people fleeing homes, the scorched earth of drought, the blackened silhouettes of forests after fires. Heartbreakingly, these images are part of her reality and our reality; they are taking place in this world that God makes and delights in and in which we make home.
As we discussed her painting, she taught me that ultimately, her painting is about feeling her way to hope. The skeletons are being drawn back into life, to live on into another day, to strive and to act for a better future. A great flag is being waved across them, not white for surrender, but red for perseverance and resistance; she calls the painting 'We are still here". Ezekiel too shared a vision of a valley of dry bones being restored into their fullness of life in God, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life" (**Ezekiel 37:4-5**)

Young people are grappling with the reality of immense injustices around them, and so I pray for God's breathing of new life into our dry bones today, and that I too might play my part in resisting destruction, and living in a way closer to God's intentions.

**Share reactions to the meditation.**

## Final Thoughts

As we are called to act justly, where would our own dry bones feel called into life, called to strive for a more just world? The lack of wellbeing in the earth, interconnects with our own wellbeing – it is our shared home. We need to care for it, so that it can care for us, as God intended, so that God's perfect ways of mercy, peace and love – of 'Shalom' might prevail.

What are the necessary steps that might help us to act more justly, to move away from the current images of injustice, and closer to God's just ways leading to peace and reconciliation, in creation and amongst people?

**Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.**

## Closing Prayer

Today's themes might have taken you to difficult places. This breath prayer might help to bring this before God:

Inhale:
Lord, break my heart…

Exhale:
For what breaks Yours

And pray …

God of all Creation, You give us a place within the shared breath of all that lives. Forgive us when we have taken more than we need, failed to honour the fragile balance of Your world, or turned away from those who suffer most when creation is harmed. Stir in us a holy longing for Your kingdom, where righteousness and peace embrace, where the land is healed, where all can flourish, and where every creature finds its place in Your care. Guide our hands, our choices and our voices, that we may act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with You, in courage, tenderness and hope.

In the name of Jesus Christ, through whom all things are made new. Amen



## Finally, to end our Advent Reflections



Thank you for joining us through Advent. We hope you have both enjoyed and been blessed by what's been shared – through our writings and in your thinking and discussions. In what's left of this busy season we trust that you will have space in which to rest in body, mind, and spirit, and that the natural world around you will offer moments of wonder, peace, quiet renewal, and reminders of God's presence and grace.

We hope to meet you again sometime in Lent of 2027 when you can resume your thinking on the question 'What does the Lord require?'

In the meantime, Merry Christmas!



# ‘What Does the Lord Require?’ Humility
## –Obedience to our Father’s will

## Introduction

During five weeks of Lent, we will unpack the summary of God’s expectations of us from Micah, that we ‘do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.’ We will think about wider aspects of that task and how we apply ourselves to it without feeling overwhelmed, and discuss how, as individuals and as a community, we enable the wellbeing and flourishing of all. This week, we focus on humility.



### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in humility You were obedient to the Father’s loving plan and redeemed the world. Teach us what it means to walk humbly with our God, following Your example. Show us the freedom that comes from knowing that we are perfectly and eternally loved. Amen.

### First Thoughts

What does the phrase ‘walk humbly with our God’ mean to you? What does it mean, do you think, to be humble? Have you known people who you think of as truly humble? How did that humility show itself in their behaviour and attitudes?
Spend some time thinking about these questions.
Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.

## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.
(**Philippians 2: 3-8**)



## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?

The writer of this passage speaks of Jesus' humility. What do you find inspiring in His example? What is challenging?

How do you think the example of Jesus' humility should shape the way Christians behave?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group. Read the passage out loud a final time.**

# A Bit of Background

Humility is a tricky concept.
Many of us perhaps confuse it with something else – low self-esteem. But humility doesn't mean having a poor self-image or thinking badly of yourself. Jesus knew exactly who He was and was able to communicate that both boldly and without arrogance. There is also a kind of manipulative behaviour that pretends to be humility, but very much isn't. We never find Jesus flattering to deceive or falsely abasing Himself in order to trick or control others.

If we take Jesus as our example, we discover that true humility is best understood as knowing the truth about yourself and being at peace with that truth. But if we look closely we will see that there is something else in the bible passage we've been considering; humility involves obedience. For Jesus, that obedience cost more than we can begin to imagine. The passage goes on to tell us that because of it the Father has given Jesus 'the name that is above every other name'. Jesus is exalted because of His humble obedience to the Father's will.

So, walking humbly with our God means learning to understand the truth about ourselves, our strengths and our weaknesses, our gifts and our frailties, preferring this knowledge to any comforting fantasies that ultimately cannot satisfy. It means making peace with that truth, knowing that the love of God is always the deeper truth, the eternal reality of who we are. And it means seeking to live in obedience to the Father's will.

**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas before moving on to the next section, jot down some ideas.**



# Humble Obedience to The Father-

## How, When and Where?

The practicalities of living in humble obedience to the Father's will have some general features, and some very specific ones.

In general, the place to start is with the two great commandments to love God and love our neighbour. The love that God commands is the love that God shows us in Christ. This involves more than just feelings. We love with our whole selves – our feelings, our actions, and our wills. When we love, we choose the good of those we love and commit ourselves to that good. As the apostle Paul writes, anything else that we do, if we do it without love, is hollow (**1 Corinthians 13**).

Obedience to the law of love extends inwards, too. As we've already seen, true humility has nothing to do with low self-esteem or poor self-image. We are all created and loved by God – this is the deep and eternal truth of our identity. We must not and may not hate that which God loves, including ourselves. Our commitment to the good of others must include good self-care.
To these general observations, we need to add some more specific thoughts. What does the Lord require of me, right here, right now? This is where discernment comes in. There is only one way to discern God's will in these more specific ways, and that is to pray. In **Romans 12,** we learn that God's will for us is 'good and perfect'. We also learn that to understand it we need to be 'transformed by the renewing of our minds'. Prayer is how we make ourselves available to the Holy Spirit's work within us.



## Testimony

*By Canon Dr Hugh Jones – Warden of the College of St Hugh*

As a teenager I met a man with a vocation to an unusual form of religious life. I don't remember much of the detail, but it seemed as though he lived as a hermit whenever he wasn't travelling the world teaching about spirituality.

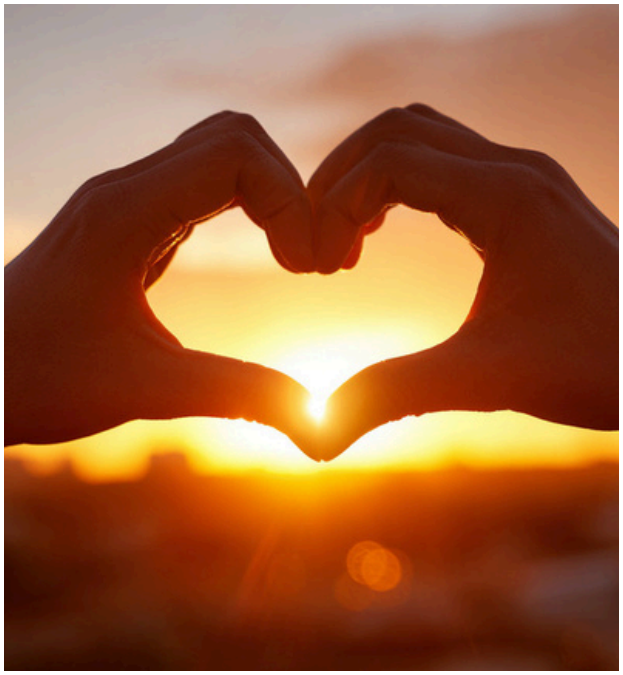
He had a simple diet and liked to say that it is good always to be just a little bit hungry. I continue to have difficulties with that thought! Anyway, I learned in our short acquaintance that true holiness in others is challenging, which we expect, but also attractive and inspiring, which we tend not to expect.

Part of the way that comes about, it seems to me, is humility. True humility is an inspiring and attractive thing because those who have it – and have it for real – are remarkably free of the oppressive preoccupation with self that burdens so many of us so much of the time. The man that I met all those years ago was most impressive because he was sufficiently at peace with himself for 'himself' not to be his primary focus of attention.

**Share reactions to the meditation**



Photo by Alexander Mass on Unsplash



## Final Thoughts

**Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.**

## Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in humility You were obedient to the Father's loving plan and redeem the world. Teach us what it means to walk humbly with our God, following Your example. Show us the freedom that comes from knowing that we are perfectly and eternally loved. Amen.



# Shalom –
## a life lived in right relationship with God

### Introduction

The prophet Micah paints a vivid picture of what the Lord requires. As we saw last week, we are to 'walk humbly with our God'. This isn't just about being humble, though. It's about being in relationship, the kind of relationship that is characterised by the Hebrew word 'shalom'. This week we explore what living in a right relationship with God might involve, and how we might experience the 'shalom' of God as we do so.



### Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you that You call us to live in relationship with You. Guide us as we reflect on this astonishing invitation. Teach us how to live well, with You. Give us peace beyond our understanding. Amen

### First Thoughts

God wants to have a relationship with us. Just pause for a minute and digest that thought. What an amazing idea! What's more, God has made that relationship possible by sending Jesus to redeem the world. That's even more amazing! But what does it actually mean, day by day, hour by hour? How do we do it? What might it feel like?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**

## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (**Philippians 4:4-7**)



## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?

How easy (or difficult) do you find it to obey an instruction to 'rejoice'?

Would you say that you have experienced 'the peace of God'? If so, how would you describe it? If not, why do you think that is?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**

Read the passage out loud a final time.



# A Bit of Background

The Hebrew word 'shalom' is usually translated as 'peace', but there's a lot more to it than that. The idea is more of a wellbeing that encompasses the whole community. Each person, body, soul and spirit, experiences this peaceful wellbeing because everything is just as it ought to be. This is neither a purely spiritual matter, nor a psychological one. It encompasses and reconciles every part of human experience. 'Shalom' is a state of being in community as well as an individual experience. It is a peace that can only ultimately come from God and is only found by those who seek God earnestly in all things.

It can also be helpful to think of this in terms of what the absence of 'shalom' looks like. In a crude sense, people are not at peace when they are at war, but this is not just a matter of armed conflict. The conflicts that disturb our wellbeing may be with far more mundane circumstances. They can be both internal and external. But the most important of all is the absence of peace with God. True 'shalom' begins when we are at peace with God. It flows out from there to bring peace with others in the community and peace within.





# Peace, Harmony and Wholeness –

## How, When and Where

A core insight of the Christian faith is that 'shalom' is not something that we can accomplish for ourselves. The first step is to understand and acknowledge that the deepest peace and wellbeing that we crave is God's gift, and God's accomplishment. This acknowledgement is present in all Christian prayer. The Lord's Prayer asks God to 'give us this day our daily bread', recognising our dependence on God for our most basic needs. When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, we begin by acknowledging our need of God's forgiveness, together.



We cannot leave it there, though. Jesus commanded His disciples to forgive each other without limit or reservation. He told them to take care to make peace with each other before going to pray and worship. The apostle Paul wrote that we should, as much as it depends on us, live peaceably with all. These instructions leave no room for a Christian community at war with itself, divided by mutual hostility and resentment.

Seeking peace within is also important. We do this in the rhythm of daily prayer, of course, but making sure we care well for ourselves in more mundane ways is also important. Getting enough sleep, keeping a good work-life balance, having a good diet and getting enough exercise are all part of our 'shalom'. So, too, is time for fun!



**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**

## Testimony

*By Canon Dr Hugh Jones – Warden of the College of St Hugh*



Among all the many thoughts bouncing around my head like super-charged ball-bearings in a surreal pinball machine, one stood out – I was not asleep. I wanted to be asleep.

It was three o'clock in the morning, so I ought to have been asleep. But I was not. I had tried a number of tricks, things that normally helped, but sleep was continuing to elude me. The one thing I hadn't tried, I'm rather embarrassed to admit, was prayer.

When it finally occurred to me to give praying a try, it was very much in those crude terms – another device to achieve the result I desired, a case of 'my will be done' not 'thy will be done'. I just wanted to sleep.

I did pray, and I did sleep, but there is more to say than that. After I prayed, but before I slept, the first thing that happened was that I discovered that it really didn't matter at all whether I was asleep or not. I was given a deep peace about being awake. I still didn't want to be awake, I just realised that it wasn't that important. And after I had slept I woke to sense of inner peace and wellbeing that I've rarely known.

These things are not technologies. God is sovereign and can meet us and respond to our prayers as God chooses. God reminded me of that by showing me that what I so desperately desired mattered far less than I thought. God answered my prayer for sleep by giving me something much more precious – His 'shalom'.

**Share reactions to the meditation**



## Final Thoughts

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.

## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you that You call us to live in relationship with You. Guide us as we reflect on this astonishing invitation. Teach us how to live well, with You. Give us peace beyond our understanding. Amen



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# Mercy – Self-Denial, Not Self-Neglect

## Introduction



According to NHS Blood and Transplant data, around 1.5 million individuals give blood annually in the UK. Whilst a proportion of that number are first time donors, some will have offered their service to the community in this way, many times over. Perhaps you are one of them. Approximately 2 million units of blood components each year are given to patients in England alone, with around two thirds of the blood donated being used to treat medical conditions including anaemia, cancer and blood disorders. Nearly a third is used in surgery and emergencies, including childbirth. This self-less act of donating blood enables the NHS to maintain a supply that benefits millions.

But what would happen if, when you donated, you gave all the blood you have? It would help a lot more people, but …

## Opening Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for the faithful, sacrificial ministry of so many within our churches – local, national, and across the globe. Help us to offer wisely the resources gifted to us, so that we can work in Your service, as disciples of Christ, each day of our lives. Amen.



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## First Thoughts

We believe in and follow a merciful God - a God of compassion, generosity, understanding and forgiveness. Do we believe that God, who possesses all these characteristics, and who loves us as His children, asks us to deny ourselves in His service to the point of self-neglect?

To emphasise God's care for us, read these examples of His love from scripture: I knew you before you were conceived (**Jeremiah 1:4-5**) I know everything about you. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. I am familiar with all your ways (**Psalm 139:3**). For you are my offspring (**Acts 17:28**) and it is my desire to lavish my love on you (**1 John 3:1)** simply because you are my child and I am your Father. (**1 John 3:1**). My plan for your future has always been filled with hope (**Jeremiah 29:11**) because I love you with an everlasting love (**Jeremiah 31:3**). My thoughts towards you are as countless as the sand on the seashore (**Psalm 139: 17-18**). For you are my treasured possession (**Exodus 19:5**). I am your greatest encourager **(2 Thessalonians 2:16-17**) and the Father who comforts you in all your troubles. (**2 Corinthians 1: 3-4**).

Whilst some Christian disciples are still called to martyrdom, no-one is ever asked to do this to themselves. So, what does the Lord require of me when it comes to self-less giving in the service of his name?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**

## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

Then Jesus told His disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross* and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

**Matthew 16:24-26 *(NB: Luke 9:22-24 speaks of taking up the cross daily).**



## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts.

Share some ideas in the group.

Read the passage out loud a final time.





# A Bit of Background

Whilst it's crucial for us to attend to our spiritual wellbeing, the wellbeing of our soul, we are not to minimise the importance of body and mind; nor should we separate them from soul. Jesus was, after all, resurrected in body. The body and soul are enmeshed. What we do to the body matters; we should care for the body and mind as much as we take spiritual care of the soul. Flourishing is for the whole of our personhood.

However, you can probably name many in church who give to the *n*th degree, making themselves unwell through overwork – laity and ordained alike. There are many drivers to our (over)-activity, not least these words of Jesus, that we have just read and discussed, who asks us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. But, as noted in Luke's Gospel, we're asked to do this daily, and to do that, we must be fit to carry out His work – each in our own way and ability. Of necessity, this means we must attend to our wellbeing. Following the call to fulfil our baptismal vocations, by definition, involves sacrifice. But giving to the last drop prevents our ability to do it the next day, and the next, and the next. In our lives of faithful service, we are called, like the blood donor, to give what we are able, what is safe and sensible, time and again, … and not to jeopardise our ability to give. Our God of mercy asks that we attend to our own self-care, (after all, in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** St Paul tells us that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit), and we do that better to fully live out our vocation, our call, … for the whole of our lives.

Perhaps we might consider a re-draft of the famous prayer by St Ignatius which speaks of giving and not counting the cost. Compare the original prayer with the following:
Teach us, good Lord, to serve You as You deserve.
To give … a sustainable offering / ministry - one in which we can go on giving.
To fight, … and in vulnerability and humility, allow others to tend our wounds.
To toil, … and rest as Jesus did – nurturing His spirit in reflection and prayer,
nurturing His social needs in friendships and collegiality, and His body with good food, and sleep.
To labour, and not to ask for reward, yet needing the encouragement given to Jesus at
baptism - the knowledge we are Your beloved, in whom You are well pleased.
To flourish in our vocation, knowing that we are doing Your will. Amen.



**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas before moving on to the next section. You may want to try writing your own version of this prayer.**

# The Love and Mercy of God –
## How, When and Where?



We may sometimes believe we're indispensable, that the work must be done, and done by us. But then, perhaps the quote, 'The graveyards are full of indispensable men' [sic], comes to mind. We're driven, often by personal expectations of ourselves, or the expectations of others, or because we feel that Christians are unable to say 'no'. But that's not God's way. We follow a God who rests, who created the Sabbath for His children. Jesus calls to all who are weary and heavy laden, offering the gift of rest, and He was known to say, 'no more'. In **Mark 6:31** Jesus says to His disciples, "Come with me … to a quiet place and get some rest." The crowds were ever present, demanding His attention, but He chose to step away. Ancient and modern societies have tended to regard people as worthwhile only while they were working, but not so our God. He was "well pleased" with His beloved Son before He even began His ministry, before He had done anything. His value was, first and foremost, in His personhood. This is true for us too. Our God is compassionate and merciful, and places a worth on our lives based not on what we do, but on our relationship with Him as Our Father, parent, creator.

### Testimony

*By The Reverend Jackie Johnson, Wellbeing & Continuing Ministerial Development Officer for the Diocese of Lincoln*

I was describing to our Diocesan Bishop all I'd been doing in support of the parish. I explained my efforts, especially in trying to encourage others into their own baptismal vocation, but few were stepping forward to offer themselves to God's service. I was affirmed by his words regarding the 'exceptional work and true dedication.' The Bishop then paused, held a silence, and gently said, 'Thank you for all you are! Now, step away for a while, and waste some time with God.'

### Final Thoughts

What would 'wasting time with God' look like for you? How could you nurture your relationship with God? What do you find rewarding/life-giving in your life of discipleship and vocation? What expectations or pressures do you experience – from yourself – from others?
Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.

### Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us prioritise our time, that we may better care for our minds, bodies, and souls, honouring all that You have made us, all we are becoming, as followers of the Way. Help us always to remember that, just as You show loving care and mercy to us, Your 'labourers', we should show the same to those who work alongside and for us. Amen.



# Justice -
## Peacemaking and Equity

### Introduction

Imagine a school where every pupil must wear the exact same blazer, a blazer that costs over £100. To some families that cost will not be a problem, and to some it will be a constant cause of anxiety and sacrifice.

Jesus moves us from equality and the sameness of treatment to equity and proportional fairness when He recounts the story of the widow's mite (**Mark 12:41-44**). He shows us justice when He flips over the tables of the money collectors (**Matthew 21:12-13**).

He tears down a system that exposed and took advantage of the vulnerable in society. He points us towards peace by asking, 'Where do our 'equal' rules make life harder for those already struggling, and who is missing from our circles as the cost of joining in is too high?'

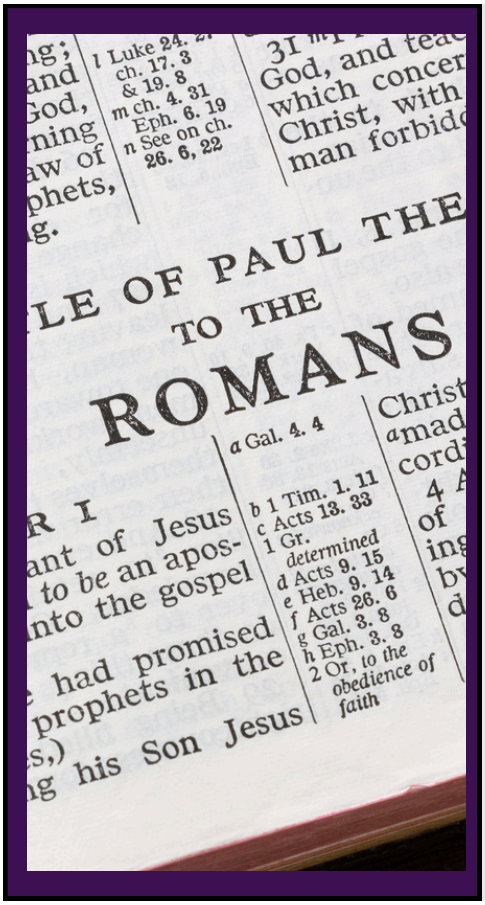
### Opening Prayer

God of all that is fair and just, open our eyes to see where equal isn't fair and give us the courage to build a level playing field for everyone. Grant us the grace to discern Your will as we strive for right relationship with You. Kindle in us the desire for healing what is broken, loving as we are loved and seeking Your image in all Your creation. Strengthen our voice to restore and affirm the precious gift of peace that You have bestowed on us. Amen.

### First Thoughts

Jesus taught us that justice and peace mean treating each other with fairness, protecting those who are vulnerable and making peace through forgiveness and love. He spoke out against unfair rules that hurt those most in need and taught us that when we welcome a stranger, we welcome Him. It might be helpful to ponder these questions. How might we contribute to our communities becoming safer and more welcoming places? What are the big problems in our world today that keep people poor and unsafe, and how as Christians do we respond to this? In what ways might we deny the quest for justice and peace?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**




## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(**Romans 12: 9-end**)

## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage?
Verse 19 tells us not to take revenge. How can we as individuals, or as part of a community, fix a wrong without just trying to get even? Verse 18 says to live at peace,' as far as it depends on you.' What does that look like when we are in disagreement or conflict?
When verse 16 talks about mixing with people of low position, what does that look like in our day-to-day lives, ensuring we include and do not leave people feeling left out?

**Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.**
**Read the passage out loud a final time.**

# A Bit of Background

Justice, equity and peace aren't ideas that we have borrowed. They have always been close to the heart of God; for He is a God who notices those others overlook, who hears the cries of the oppressed and who longs for people to live well together. Micah sums it up beautifully: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (**Micah 6:8**). It sounds wonderfully straightforward. Living it out is not quite so easy.
The truth is, our churches and communities are full of ordinary people, just like you and me, and this can be both their greatest strength and, occasionally, their greatest challenge. We bring our faith, our generosity, our experience, and our blind spots, our assumptions and, if we're honest, our favourite ways of doing things. Sometimes we are wonderfully welcoming. Sometimes we don't even notice if someone is missing. Sometimes we mistake keeping everyone happy for making peace, when the peace Jesus speaks about (**Matthew 5:9**) often involves listening well, speaking honestly and being prepared to change.

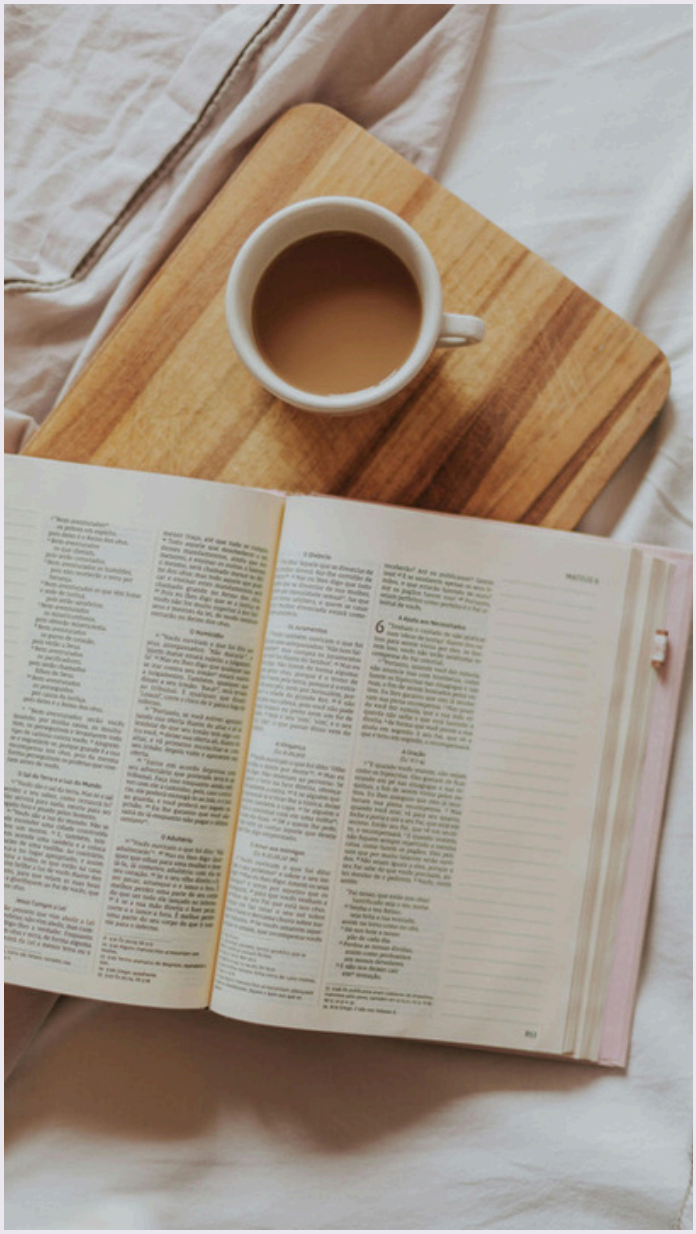
Perhaps that's where Lent begins, by asking where God might be inviting each of us to take one small step. Is there someone whose voice we've not heard? Is there an assumption we've never questioned? Is there an opportunity to be fairer, kinder or braver than we were yesterday? Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom often begins like a mustard seed (**Matthew 13:31–32**) small, almost unnoticed, but full of possibility.

**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas. Before moving on to the next section, jot down some ideas.**

# Justice, Equity, and Peace –
## How, When and Where?

The good news is that God has never waited for perfect people before getting on with His work. The disciples certainly weren't perfect, and neither were the first Christian communities. When we read the book of Acts we find extraordinary generosity alongside disagreements and misunderstandings. People argued about who belonged, what was fair and how to care for those who were being overlooked (**Acts 6.1-7; Acts 15**). Again and again, the Holy Spirit nudged people back towards the bigger picture of God's Kingdom. They listened, prayed, sometimes changed their minds, and kept walking together. There is hope in that for us. If God can work with people like Peter, Paul and the rest of that wonderfully mixed bunch, there is every reason to believe He can work with us too.





So perhaps the question for us isn't whether justice, equity and peace matter. Scripture has already answered that. The more searching questions are these: How do we grow them in our churches and communities? When are we called to speak, to listen or to act? Where is God already at work, inviting us to join in? Sometimes our response will be to speak up when something doesn't seem right. Sometimes it will be to listen to a story we've never heard before, or to notice the person who has quietly slipped into the shadows. Sometimes it will mean having the courage to change our minds, our habits or even our plans. None of that is always comfortable, but then Jesus never promised that following Him would be comfortable. He did promise that He would be with us.

As you reflect together perhaps consider that Lent isn't about ticking things off a list; rather it's about allowing God to shape us. Perhaps think about where you already see justice, equity and peace flourishing in your church or community? Where are they harder to find? Where have you been encouraged? Where have you been surprised? And where might God be inviting you, and your church and community to take just one faithful step?



## Testimony

*By The Reverend Lynne Smith, Warden of Lay Ministry for the Diocese of Lincoln*

Some time ago, I invited a minister who is a gay man to preach in my home church. I invited him because I knew him to be a gifted, faithful follower of Jesus whose ministry had enriched my own faith, and I wanted others to hear his story too. As he preached, I felt joy as people listened intently. Afterwards, many told me how much they had appreciated hearing from him. It was one of those moments when I caught a glimpse of the inclusive, welcoming Church I long to be part of. But not everyone felt the same. Some people were disappointed by my decision and told me so. They weren't angry or confrontational, but they were genuinely troubled. I found myself carrying both the joy of those who had felt seen and encouraged, and the sadness of those who felt I had let them down. That took me back to prayer.

I remain certain that justice and equity mean recognising the God-given dignity, worth and calling of every person. At the same time, I was reminded that peace isn't created by winning arguments or pretending our differences don't exist. It comes through listening well, speaking honestly, loving generously and refusing to write one another off.

I still believe inviting him was the right thing to do. I also believe God was at work in the conversations that followed, stretching my compassion, deepening my patience and reminding me that grace is needed on every side.

Justice, equity and peace are not abstract ideas. They are choices we make every day: to welcome, to listen, to stand alongside each other, and to keep loving one another even when we don't all see things in the same way. For me, that feels like the way of Jesus.

## Share reactions to the meditation

## Final Thoughts

Justice, peace and equity are not simply ideas to think about; they are values to be lived. They are found in the choices we make, the people we notice and the voices we choose to hear. May we be encouraged to keep walking together, trusting that even small acts of courage, kindness and grace can help reveal God's kingdom among us.

Take the last few minutes to jot down any final thoughts. Share some ideas with the group.

## Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us prioritise our time, that we may better care for our minds, bodies, and souls, honouring all that You have made us, all we are becoming, as followers of the Way. Help us always to remember that, just as You show loving care and mercy to us, Your 'labourers', we should show the same to those who work alongside and for us. Amen.



# The Whole Body - A Flourishing Community

## Introduction

It isn't an accident that Christianity places so much emphasis on the body. Our religion isn't simply a rule book to play by, or a collection of intellectual precepts to adhere to in order to work out how to live your best life. Christianity is a faith that confidently says, you are knitted together in a relationship with God and with the people whom He loves. Christians believe that our lives are bound together with others, that we are all in the same boat. God wants you to flourish, but He doesn't see that happening on your own. Your flourishing is bound together through our common baptism with the whole body, the Church (**Ephesians 4:5-6**). We are impoverished when certain members of our Christian community stop meeting together for the prayers, for teaching, for the breaking of the bread (**Acts 2:42**). In the breaking and sharing of the one bread, we recognise the presence of Christ in our midst and that we are incorporated into Him.

## Opening Prayer

God our Father, show us what love looks like through the life, death, and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus. May we look upon Him with the eyes of faith, putting our trust completely in Him. Spirit of God, may we be caught up in the communion of love between the Son and the Father, and experience a belonging deeper than words. Lord Jesus, draw close to us now and make us members of Your body; honoured, nourished and fed. Amen.

## First Thoughts

There is a famous icon of Christ in the Church of Reconciliation in Taizé, where Jesus is holding the jewelled gospel book under His left arm, His right arm is around the disciple stood next to Him. The warm ochre of the icon glows in a way that doesn't dazzle, but reassures. Christ is close, He knows the name of the disciple, and Christ looks out of the icon to the viewer as if to say, I know you by name, too. The disciple stood next to Jesus is looking out to the viewer as well. This icon shows that, 'when two or three are gathered together in My name, there I will be in their midst' (**Matthew 18:20**). This icon depicts what it's like to be part of the family of God: known by name, and in close proximity to Jesus.

What does closeness to Christ mean to you?
How does God seek to reconcile the world to himself?
Why is the Church described as the Body of Christ?
Where can we experience human flourishing in community?

**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas. Before moving on to the next section, jot down some ideas.**

## Dwelling in the Word

Read the following passage from the Bible twice, leaving some silence between each reading.

"Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.
Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."
(**1 Corinthians 12:14;19-27**)



## Revisit

What stands out for you in this passage? Spend some time thinking about these questions. Jot down some of your thoughts. Share some ideas in the group.

Read the passage out loud a final time.

# Spiritual Friendship – How, When and Where?

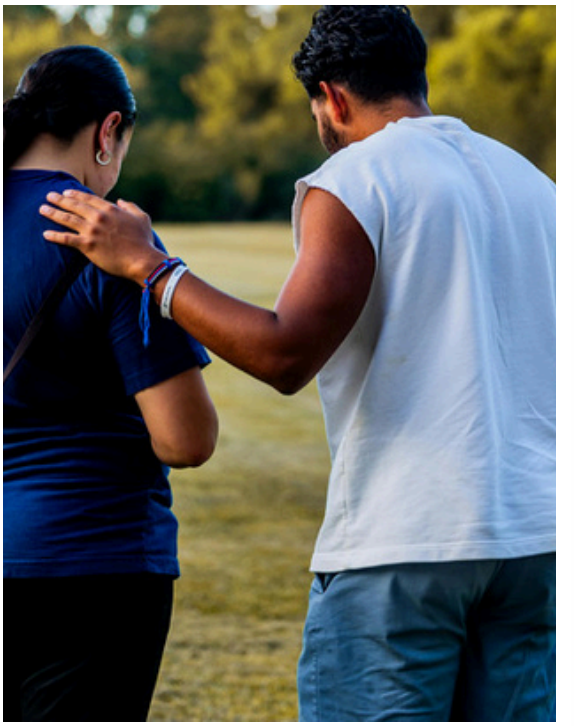
Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, but friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (**John 15:15**). Jesus says this in the context of a meal, where He has already offered a summary of His teaching to them (**John 12:44-50**) and has washed His disciples' feet (**John 13:1-11**) and given them a new commandment (**John 13:31-35**). In the Gospel of John, there is no prayer in the garden of Gethsemene, but there is a long prayer said over His disciples (**John 17**) before they went out across the Kidron valley. Jesus prays that all of those whom the Father has given Him may all be one. The unity Jesus prays for has purpose, that the world may look upon them and come to know the Father also.

Our unity as Christians and our friendship with each other is dependent on one thing: abiding in Jesus. The mission of the Church throughout history has been primarily for this, that ordinary people might know they can access the extraordinary reality of life in God. Jesus says that the world will come to know this through the community of the baptised, those to whom the Spirit has been given (**John 20:22**). How then do we abide in Jesus, enabling us to call one another friends, and experience life within the Body of Christ? Amazingly, there are many ways! Praying with or without words, reading the scriptures daily, regularly participating in the gift of Holy Communion, seeking to grow in the virtues planted in you when you were baptised.
Abiding in Him changes our perspective on how to best use our time. We may be able to see that the best use of our time is actually 'wasting time' with others through chats over coffee, meals together, walks, shared interests. Jesus calls us to be His friends, but also to seek spiritual friendship with others. This is a high calling, as it leads to the fulfilment of a promise. Jesus promised that when two or three gather together in His name, He will be present. A flourishing community is one where every day is Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day!



## Testimony

*By the Reverend Clay Roundtree, Director of Ordinands and Vocations for the Diocese of Lincoln*



As soon as I open my mouth, I sometimes expect people to say, "You're a long way from home." I do find myself on a regular basis telling people a bit about where I was born, how I came to live in England, where my family is now and if I'll ever go back to Oklahoma.

I've lived all of my adult life in England, and yet my accent immediately gives me away. It's obvious that I'm connected to another tribe, another people, another place, across the pond.

Our connections to people and places matter so much, and we are somewhat defined by them. Are you a Southerner? Are you from the North? Are you a Yellowbelly? Are you a Yankee? My life is rooted in England, and more recently in this wonderful county.

My rootedness to places and people has been shaped by my faith. Gathering in the name of Christ with others until it becomes a trusted habit begins to shape you over time and your perception of who you are. Through a sustained faith in Jesus, I have been blessed with a strong sense of belonging, and this has followed me wherever I have come to call home.

Sure, my wife and children live in England, but that sense of being "home" is much deeper than flesh and blood – it's a spiritual reality. Perhaps through regular prayer with other Christians you've sensed it too; that you belong to a community, one that isn't simply rooted in a local congregation. I've had moments in my life when I recognised the Body of Christ before my eyes, in both the large gatherings and the small. Being members of the Body of Christ is what connects us together. What a gift it is to see ourselves "at home", wherever we might be, a deep sense of belonging to the family of God, one that spans the centuries

## Share reactions to the meditation



## Final Thoughts

We have ended our journey by reflecting that God requires us to live well together.

For Christians, this means being the 'Body of Christ', the people in whom the living God can be met and known. This is a challenging calling! Yet it is also a liberating one. We are none of us called to be Christ's body individually. We are all called to be Christ's body together. Each of us has a unique contribution to make, a special role to play, but none of us has to do it all by ourselves. Spend the last few minutes reflecting on this, and sharing any final thoughts. What might you do differently as a result?

**Spend a little time discussing (or reflecting on) these ideas. Before moving on to the next section, jot down some ideas.**

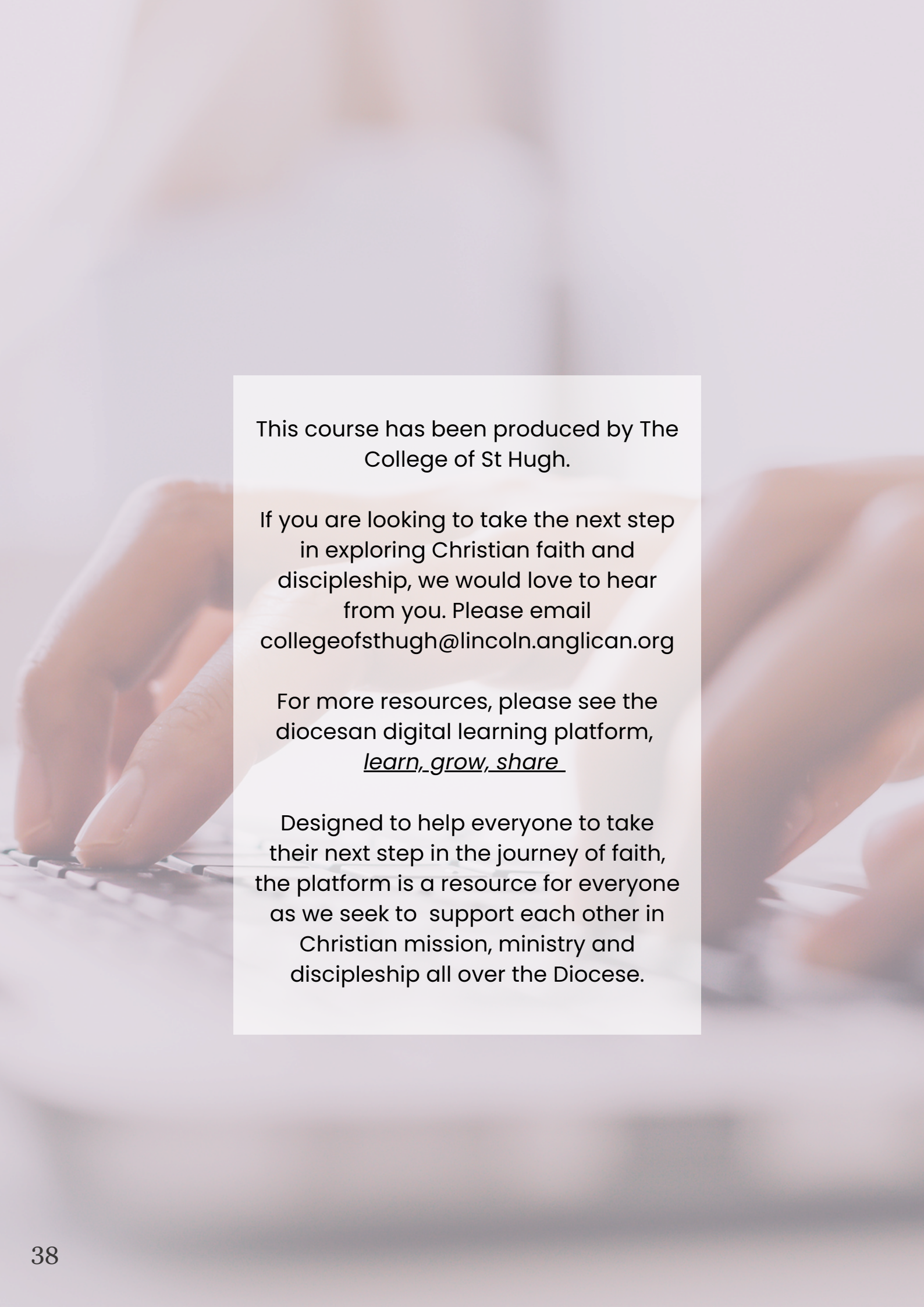
## Closing Prayer

God our Creator, You have shown us in Jesus a radical openness to the other, pointing to a way of life that honours all and makes a way for the reconciliation of humanity. Fill our hearts with a longing for peace, justice, mercy, goodness and truth. May we who are members of the Body of Christ, seek to heal the brokenness we see around us, and be concerned for the well-being of everyone in our community. Amen.

## Finally, to end our Lenten Reflections

Through Advent and Lent we have shared reflections on the theme of 'What does the Lord require?' We hope that everyone who has joined us, whether as part of a small group, or working on their own, has found blessing in the experience. Our prayer is that each and every one of you has felt your sense of flourishing in God's care and love to be enriched. We pray also, as we celebrate Easter once more, that you may rejoice and rest in the love of God whose risen Son returns to us from death, offering fullness of life now and in eternity.



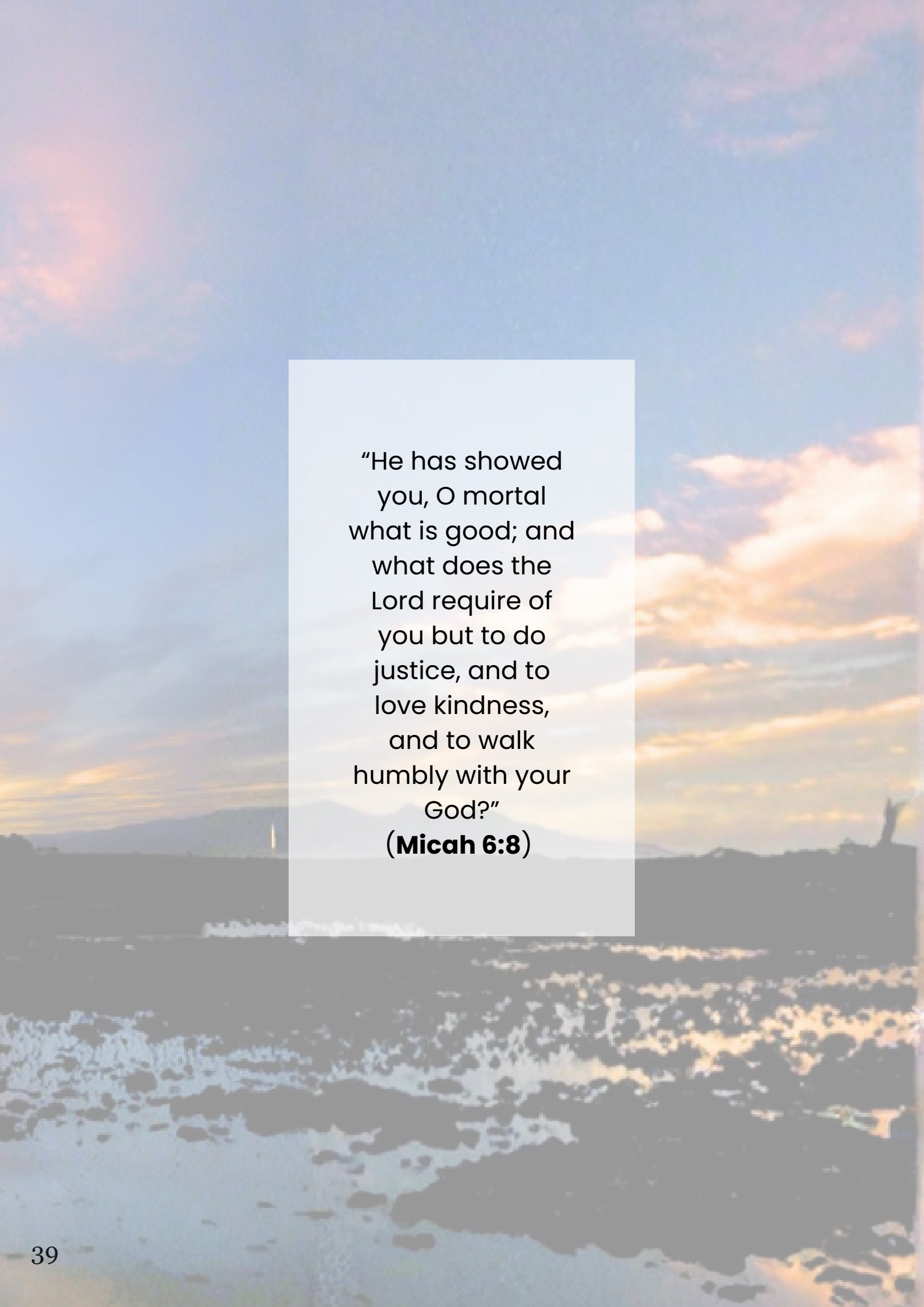


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If you are looking to take the next step in exploring Christian faith and discipleship, we would love to hear from you. Please email collegeofsthugh@lincoln.anglican.org

For more resources, please see the diocesan digital learning platform, *learn, grow, share*

Designed to help everyone to take their next step in the journey of faith, the platform is a resource for everyone as we seek to support each other in Christian mission, ministry and discipleship all over the Diocese.



"He has showed you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"
(**Micah 6:8**)

