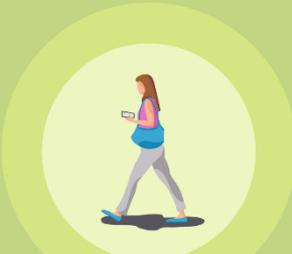


MAN OF SORROW
PEOPLE OF HOPE

LENT 2021

SanctuaryFirst **CONNECT**

The Parable of
Social ↔ Distancing



INTRODUCTION

Lent 2021 - Connect group resource

Lent 2021 will be a Lent like no other. Many of us have become well versed in contemplation, quiet, reflection and introspection over the last year. While for others we have been going at breakneck speed and won't be slowing anytime soon. As we reflect on the mystery of the incarnation that Jesus became one of us, overcoming the distance between divinity and humanity, we hope to rediscover the humble saviour who walks alongside us whatever the pace, whatever the circumstances, speaking words of love.

This collection is designed to be flexible. You could use it on your own while journaling, or as a household studying together, or with a friend you message back and forth with, or in an online group (such as a [Connect Group](#)).

It is divided into two sections: [The Parable of Social Distancing](#) which begins January 31st before Lent and spans February and covers Ash Wednesday on February 17th. Then from March 7th: [Man of Sorrows, People of Hope](#) which takes us up to Holy Saturday the final day of Lent before Easter Sunday.



Our current safety measures of social distancing can be read as a parable of how we have already been increasingly 'socially distant' from one another for years, becoming in many ways disconnected from those around us as we focus on our own individual needs. What lessons can be drawn from our common experience of living at a distance from each other? What have we learned about holiness, communion, freedom and love as we live out the parable of social distancing?

Jesus becoming one of us was a phenomenal act of social reconciliation that burst into the normal run of history. Divinity met humanity in a theological, political and cultural kaleidoscope. His life contained sorrow, indignity, oppression, slander, violence and suppression and yet it was also beautiful, daring, loving, inspiring, enriching and vibrant. Christ's life among us is itself a parable. His life – with all its good, its bad and its ugly mattered and had so much worth. It is a story of darkness and light. Struggle and triumph. In the same way that our lives striving and delighting, laughing and weeping matter and have worth. His very life tells us that no matter the cost you can't put a price on love.

In Jesus's life, death and resurrection is a fulfilment of a story told again and again through the Bible and human history – of God reaching through the thorns and weeds and branches to tell us we are loved and that we can take hope.

In this resource you will find meditations, Lent Legacy prompts that invite you to engage in daily mindful actions, and discussion questions to dig deeper into the Bible and our relationships with God.





The Parable of
Social ↔ ***Distancing***



You Can't Escape Holiness

All of our questions are intended as a starting point, feel free to adapt to your context and circumstances.

Read Psalm 111: 1-10

What does this passage mean – surely we are not to be afraid of God?

What does it mean to fear God and how can that be the beginning of wisdom?

Read Mark 1: 21-28

The premise of this theme is that the current safety measures of 'social distancing' can be read as a parable of how we have already been increasingly 'socially distant' from one another for years – becoming in many ways disconnected from one another. As we see from this encounter in the synagogue Jesus is fully physically, intellectually and spiritually present. In our day to day lives have we socially distanced ourselves from healing, teaching and spiritually?

Have we compartmentalised these things into a box that we only open once a week or even less?

How can we be like Jesus and be more present in body, mind and spirit?

Read Malachi 3: 1-4

Sometimes it is hard not to feel socially distant from God. But there is always a way back. What has to be refined in our lives to bring us close to God again?

What parts of our body need to become alive again to Jesus to create community, to experience freedom, to live out love?



Anticipating Lent

Dear God,

As we anticipate Lent,

guide us as we prepare for this time of reflection

as we consider the distance between us

and the reconciliation you have made possible.

What do you want us to focus on?

What do you want us to learn?

What do you want us to move on from?

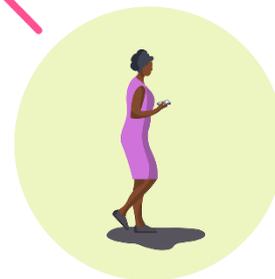
Who are you leading us to?

We ask all these things

grateful for your wisdom that can plant seeds in sorrow

so we may reap with joy.

Amen.



Your freedom is my freedom?

As we prepare for Lent 2021 what are you hoping to discover about God? Consider maintaining a journal over the weeks ahead.

Read Luke 2: 22-40

How good are we at honouring and listening to the voices of older Christians? Have we become distanced from older voices like that of Anna and Simeon?

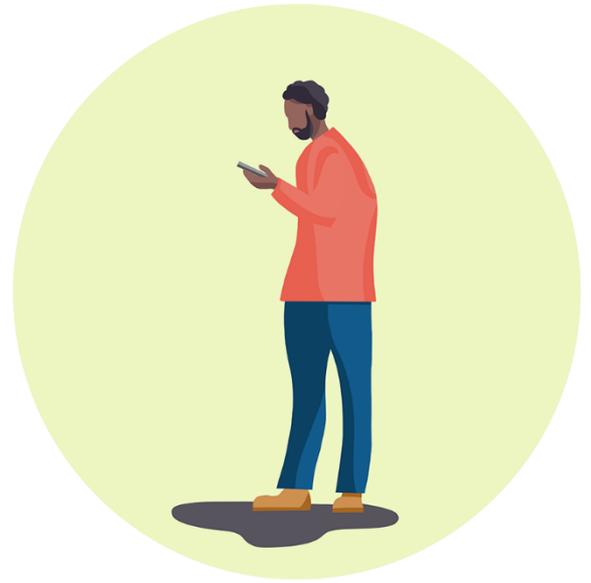
How can we ensure all generations are heard?

Read 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

Humility, servanthood and love are the marks of those who risk all for the sake of the Gospel. How far will we travel down such a road in order to bring others to Jesus?

Read 2 Kings 2: 1-12

It's never easy to pass the mantle to another. What are the reasons for this?



Ash Wednesday - Meditating on Psalm 51

There is something immensely powerful about speaking honest thoughts when you are feeling broken. There is also something immensely powerful about those words being heard. For some these are spoken to a therapist, for some they are spoken to friends or family, and for some they are spoken to God.

We are so lucky to have the Psalms as part of the collection of writings in the Bible because they show us that it is important to nurture the emotional side of our relationship with God through the Spirit and through prayer. They also show us something very important: God can take it. God is not oversensitive and prone to look away when we are distressed or angry, God is there with us, God hears us, God accepts our curses and our praises and our groans until we have come through to a place of peace once again.

To have a relationship with God in which you can be truly known, heard and loved is a privilege and a transformative power in its own right. For who can take that away from us? No-one! Not even our own selves. No matter how silent we might grow, God will always be waiting, patient as the universe, for a word or a cry asking to bring us back into relationship again. God is bigger than we can imagine and hears us when we call.

God of transforming love,

We come to you in our sorrow, in our hurting, in our longing and you hear us.

Help us now to hear you too, to rest in your arms and feel your peace.

Teach us to mend our broken spirit even as you begin the work for us.

Amen.

Lily Cathcart



Your freedom is my freedom?

Read Mark 9: 2-9

What do you think is the difference between a 'realisation' and a 'revelation'?

How do reasoning and faith interact in our walk with God?

Read Isaiah 58: 1-12

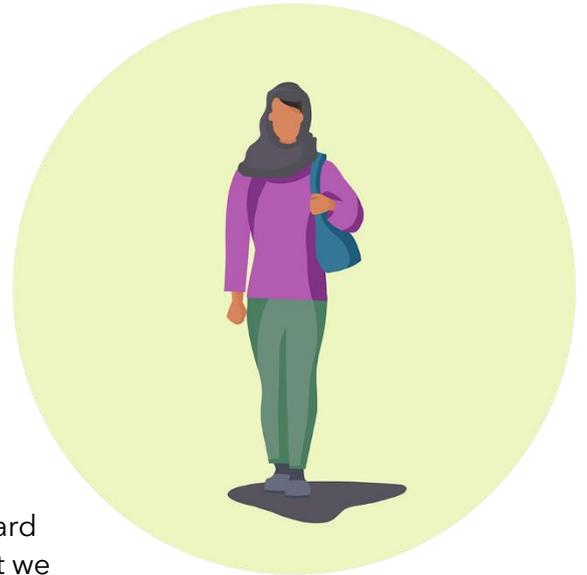
The true meaning of Lent (which begins on Ash Wednesday 17th February) is not about an outward show of discipline and abstinence. It is not a season of rule keeping. It is about an inward transformation that changes our will and our behaviours so that we become servants of the poor and afflicted rather than performers of services to the rich and powerful. True fasting is to choose "to loose the bonds of injustice".

What is one injustice that it is in your power and will to do something about?

Read Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Most of us (we assume) don't carry a trumpet around so that we can blast it every time we do something virtuous, but we often find subtle and not so subtle ways to brag about our actions to others.

When giving to charity why is it wrong to boast about it? Why is there an emphasis on secrecy in the reading?



Take a moment...

As part of our Lent reflections this year we are inviting you to take on a Lent Legacy action every day. They are little opportunities to make space for rest, reflection, and new insights as you go. Lent is an important time in the church calendar to slow down and make time to focus our minds on God.

Each day during Lent take some time on your own to follow one of these legacy moments.

17th of February

Think about one injustice that it is in your power and will to do something about and leave the legacy.

18th of February

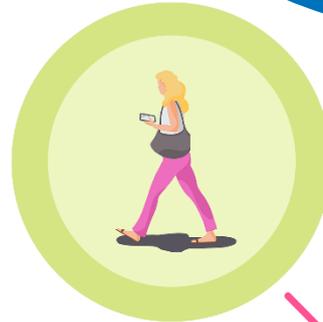
Reflect – What part of you needs to be rehabilitated?

19th of February

Consider – Who is it that God wants you to see with new eyes?

20th of February

Reflect – Who is it that you need to back off from order that God's grace can be encountered? Who is it that you could give hidden support to?



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Covenants, signs and promises

Read Genesis 9: 8-17

This reading is the dramatic ending of the flood narrative with God's setting of his bow across the clouds as a sign of his covenant with a restored humanity.

When should we humans take the blame for incidents that insurance companies call an 'Act of God'? Tragically many of the disasters we suffer are as a result of humans upsetting the balance of nature.

The covenant in the reading is made between God and "and all living creatures of every kind on the earth". How can we take better responsibility for God's earth on behalf of every living creature?

Read Mark 1: 9-13

After his baptism Jesus socially distanced himself in the wilderness.

It is often in times of reflection and solitude that we see more vividly the signs and promises of God. But times of isolation can also bring strain and temptation as we are removed from those around us who support us.

What are the temptations we face when we 'get away from it all' and how can we make sure we stay tuned in to God?



Read Psalm 22: 23-31

In this time of pandemic and mask wearing verse 24 resonates especially: 'he did not hide his face from me'. During a time of absence and distance it is comforting to know that God is not hidden.

What have been the signs and promises of presence that have sustained you through lockdowns? It could be letters or emails or video calls with friends and family. What about signs of God – have there been any moments in the quiet where you have felt a sense of God's presence?

Take a moment...

21st of February

Try baking a rainbow cake and share it. Find a rainbow card and post it. Perhaps just be a little more colourful for the rest of your life?

22nd of February

Reflect – If God is faithful, who do we need to be more faithful towards?

23rd of February

If you have been baptised – lift a glass of water, drink it and thank God for your baptism even if you can't remember it, it's grace received. If you haven't been baptised – lift a glass of water, drink it and reflect upon how you too are invited to the waters of baptism.

24th of February

Consider – What are the temptations that come with introspection?

25th of February

Reflect – What signs of God's presence might we revisit and wonder at? If you have been baptised, find out the date you were and celebrate it every year with friends.

26th of February

Take part in an online communion service at some point during Lent.

27th of February

Believe a promise God made to us. Fix it with a sign. It could be a stone, a gift you give yourself, or a gift you give to another.



The parables of Jesus, lessons learned from social distancing

Read Luke 10:25-37

The priest and the Levite were practicing social distancing long before the rest of us...

The forced separation we are going through at the moment throws into perspective what you might call the selfish social distancing many of us were engaging in before the pandemic – preferring to hold back, look away, and cross to the other side of the street to avoid facing one another.

Who is your neighbour – the people who need you! In these restricted times and in the future when restrictions are lifted – what are things we can do for the people who need us?

Discuss as a group

Do you have a favourite parable?

What has social distancing taught us about the kingdom of God?

If you had to make up a parable about social distancing and the dilemmas it has brought about what would your story look like?

What issues would you raise and resolve?



Read Matthew 9: 16-17

What has to change in the church to face the new reality that will meet congregations on their return to their buildings in the future? Can you put the new things we have discovered about God and our communities in this past year into the same old formats?

How can we reshape how we 'do church' in light of what we have learned through this past turbulent year?

Take a moment...

28th of February

Reflect – Who is it God is inviting you to draw back into the fold?

1st of March

Ask God's forgiveness for the times that we have by our judgemental attitude socially distanced ourselves from others.

2nd of March

Ask God if he will help you examine your heart.

3rd of March

What risks would you take to bring harmony back into your family, your church, your neighbourhood?

4th of March

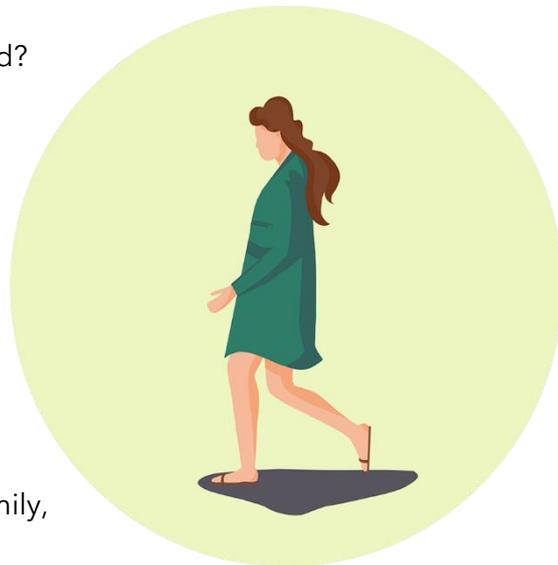
What would a letter of gratitude look like written to God? What would a letter of gratitude look like written to a friend who is a key worker?

5th of March

Consider – What part could you play in getting new wine into new wineskins? (See Matthew 9: 16-17)

6th of March

What practices in church life have to die in order to let new things flourish? (See John 12: 24)



MAN OF SORROW
PEOPLE OF HOPE



Man of sorrows

Jesus's sojourn among us embodied an ongoing divine message that while sorrow comes and night falls, so too will our hearts fill again and the sun rise.

Read Exodus 20: 1-17

These ancient commandments offer divine way markers towards hope and away from sorrow. They say – remember who I am, remember who you are, remember to rest. Then they offer a roadmap through the heartbreak inevitable in discordant communities found when intimacy, family, rest, the divine, livelihoods and the value of life break down.

There is so much to unpack in this sequence but as a starter let's consider verse 12 about honouring our mother and father. Who have been the 'allopuments' in your life? (The people who were not your parents but who helped raise you and shape who you have become like other family members, neighbours, teachers, Godparents and more). And in an even wider sense who have been your parents in faith? Perhaps people you have never met but who left a legacy which helped guide and inspire you. How can we give all these different kinds of parents honour?

Read Psalm 19

The vivid image of honey speaks of how in the midst of the hurt of life the sweet (and even antibacterial) rules of God bring balm and comfort.

As a group come up with a range of 'sweet things' you could do tomorrow to live out God's love in your local communities.

Continued...



Man of sorrows

Continued...

Read John 14: 1-7

Jesus knew the role he had to take on, to become truly a man of sorrows and in that sorrow to give us the opportunity to blossom as a people of hope. He was mindful of the pain to come and yet he took heart in the expansive divine love he was fulfilling.

Jesus urges every generation to take heart. 'Taking heart' doesn't mean ignoring or suppressing or minimising the heartache. We can't wish the pain away. But through taking heart we make a gesture of hope, we stake a claim of ownership on a future promised us where the story of who we are will make sense of where we have come. As Julian of Norwich famously said: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

How can we gently and sensitively encourage one another in these difficult times to take heart?



Take a moment...

7th of March

Sit quietly and read Isaiah 53: 3-12 out loud. Pause and reflect on the drama and severity of the words. Read it out loud again. Then say a prayer to God with whatever is on your heart.

8th of March

Take some time today to rest.

9th of March

Think about the 'alloparents' in your life, the people who were not your parents but who helped raise you and shape who you are. If they are still alive and you are in touch with them consider writing them a note to say you are thinking of them.

10th of March

Act – To put God's love into action in your life what is something sweet you could do for someone today? Maybe not the first person you think of, cast the net a little wider and see who comes to mind.

11th of March

Reflect – imagine showing Jesus around a place that is meaningful for you. What would you point out to him?

12th of March

Say a prayer for the isolated, the lonely, the alone.

13th of March

Reflect – what are the troubles in your heart that you can hand over to Jesus's loving care?



Aquainted with grief

Read John 2: 1-12

Jesus was acquainted with grief but he was on first name terms with feasting and friendship and festivity! His public ministry that we hear about in the gospels was only a few years and much of that largely consisted of hanging out with people informally – grabbing a bite, telling stories, travelling. He was not aloof or above the crowd. As we see in this reading he was happy to roll his sleeves up and take a role in the hospitality.

Why does Jesus's mother make a point of telling him about the wine and why does he rebuff her and yet do something about it anyway? Was this totally 'a thing' that Jesus was known to do? Do you think he did similar things at other times in his life?

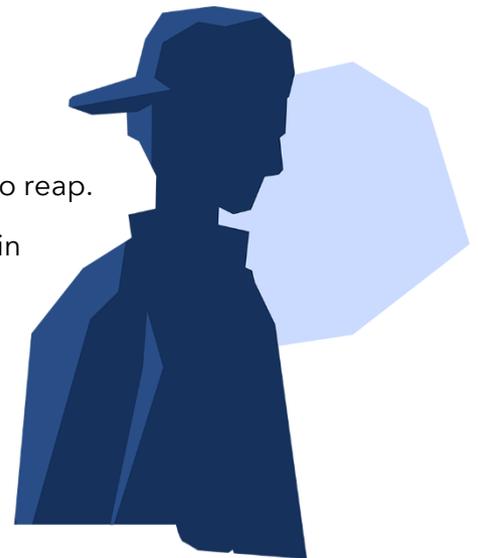
For a man that knew the sorrow that lay ahead how did he manage to exude such liveliness, humour and enthusiasm?

Read Psalm 126

Sometimes our bittersweet tears can lead to something new. Like unassuming seeds that grow into something wonderful and beautiful to reap.

What are the tears of 2020 that can be planted in 2021 and harvested in the decade ahead? Through all the upheaval and turmoil what can we learn from the heartache of last year and use to work towards a better future?

Continued...



Aquainted with greif

Continued...

Read John 16: 16-22

In the first three verses the phrase 'little while' (in NRSVA translation) is used six times!

Our lives are lived in little whiles. Little whiles of coming and going; this thing and then the next. Our days and years have rise and fall, presence and absence, distance and reunion. Jesus reassures us that through pain and difficulty that new life can and will be found. There will be weeping. And then, then there will be rejoicing.

Why do we go through sorrow to get to the joy? Why is life difficult? Why isn't there just a shortcut to joy? – As a group you don't have to come up with definitive answers. These are big questions, and you may, like the disciples, just want to repeat and puzzle for a little while...



Take a moment...

14th of March

Act – What's something you could do today to 'round up' to be unexpectedly generous to others?

15th of March

What is a song that lifts your spirits? Find a moment today to listen to it, or even play or sing it yourself.

16th of March

Reflect – Think about an everyday thing that Jesus would have experienced on earth – try to enter his first century world.

17th of March

Symbolic action – Take some water and slowly pour it into a bowl, glass or cup. As you watch the water think of the tears you have cried over your life and reflect on the tender love of God who cares for us.

18th of March

Act – Is there any small step you can take today that could be the start of something new? Ask God to bless your new endeavour.

19th of March

Take a little while simply to 'be' in the presence of God. You don't need to do or say anything, simply take a moment of quiet.

20th of March

Symbolic action – As a time of prayer hold your two hands in front of you – look at your left hand and take a moment to hold the things that sadden you. Look at your right hand and take a moment to hold the things that bring you joy. Then bring your hands together, fingers interlaced, to bring it all before God.

The travail

Read Isaiah 53: 3-12

Isaiah 53: 11 in the King James version of the Bible reads: “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” That word ‘travail’, meaning laborious effort, comes from a Latin origin referring to a torture implement (three + stakes). ‘Travail’ isn’t commonly used in contemporary English but the word ‘travel’ which we use frequently was originally a Middle English variant of travail and had the same meaning. Imagine if our Sunday newspapers had pulled out ‘Travail’ supplements and you could go to a ‘Travail Agents’ to book some painful effort... It’s useful to ponder on the links between travails and travels – in either case we find ourselves ending up somewhere new.

This reading foreshadows the mystery of the incarnation – that Jesus’s soul travelled, it went through the darkness and into the light on our behalf. It wasn’t instantaneous or automatic, it took effort and love and sacrifice. Why did Jesus walk our road and not just ‘helicopter’ over it? Why go to such extraordinary lengths to experience life on a human scale?

Read 2 Corinthians 8: 1-9

As we have learned again during the pandemic: generosity and wealth aren’t linked. Some of the most generous people have been those with the most to lose who have gone over and above to help others. How have you experienced generosity over the past year?

How can we excel in generosity ourselves in the week ahead?



Continued...

The travail

Continued...

Read Hebrews 9: 11-15

The mind-blowing truth about Jesus is that he travelled our road, he felt our pain, and in so doing brought about our redemption, our joy and our restoration. Jesus cares deeply about us and wants to have a relationship with us.

Imagine going on a walk with Jesus. As a group discuss the different places you would take him. What would you show him along the way?

Then – here's the twist – you can actually go on this walk with Jesus! He lives! Next time you visit that place go alongside Jesus (if it isn't practical to get to that place yourself then take Jesus somewhere else and chat about it anyway, he won't mind) pointing things out as you go.



Take a moment...

21st of March

Choose a Bible verse (it could be Isaiah 53: 11) and make a commitment to read it every morning this week.

22nd of March

Draw a heart on a piece of paper and write in it the words that represent your relationship with God.

23rd of March

Choose a verse from the Bible and over the course of the day have a go at memorising it.

24th of March

Reflect – How can you be a good listener today? Listening to God but also to others around about you?

25th of March

Reflect – How can you surprise others with generosity today?

26th of March

Spend five minutes today in silence. You don't need to pray or think about anything specific, just rest. Try to calm your mind and if it wanders gently bring it back to the idea of quiet and silence.

27th of March

Reflect – Imagine going on a walk with Jesus. Where would you take him? What would you show him?



Poured out his soul

Each year Holy Week before Easter Sunday depicts the drama of reality, history, blood, and bone all coming together in a cosmic culmination: one soul poured out for all – freely.

Read Psalm 71

As our own lives unfold sometimes all we can do is, as we say in Scotland, 'haud on' (hold on).

Are there any Bible verses or songs or poems (or something else) that help bring you to a place of hope and praise? That help you haud on when you're feeling overwhelmed?

Read 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26

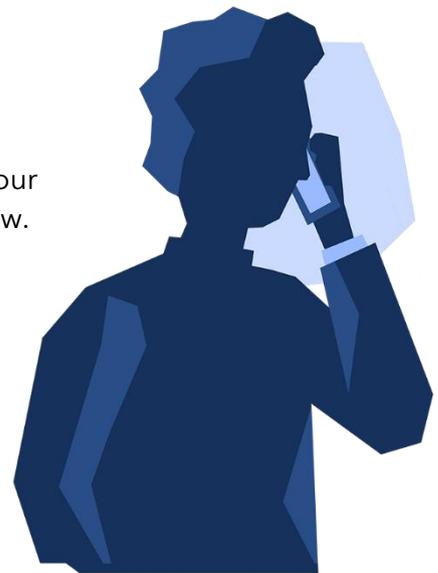
What has been your experience of Communion over your life?

Read Hebrews 4: 14-16

We can approach Jesus with boldness. He has identified deeply with our sorrow and our hope and through his travail has given us our tomorrow.

How has your journey been through Lent 2021? Have you learnt, or rediscovered, or grown to appreciate anything new about yourself or about God?

What are your sincere hopes that you want to bring boldly to Jesus this Easter?



Take a moment...

28th of March

Draw two wings on a piece of a paper. Inside the wings write the names of those you especially want to feel the comfort of God's presence.

29th of March

What is a transformation you would like to see in wider society? What is something small you could do to help make that change a reality?

30th of March

Reflect – What are the essential things about God that you hold (hold) on to when you're feeling overwhelmed?

31st of March

Take a few minutes to be mindful of your breath, perhaps breathing slowly in and out. As you do consider the day ahead and think of all the places and situations your breath is going to take you today.

1st of April

Reflect – What have the bread and wine of Communion meant to you in your life?

2nd of April

Pray today for all who suffer, all who have no place to rest or shelter, all who are cast out and alone.

3rd of April

Tomorrow brings the promise of Easter, but there is one more day and night to go. As you look back over Lent this year what have you noticed about yourself or God? Have you learned anything new or reaffirmed anything you felt already? To God be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.



Holy week - With fresh eyes

On Sunday – we picture Jesus’s eyes full of love.

On Monday – we picture Jesus’s smile full of humour.

On Tuesday – we picture Jesus’s hands, rough from work and travel.

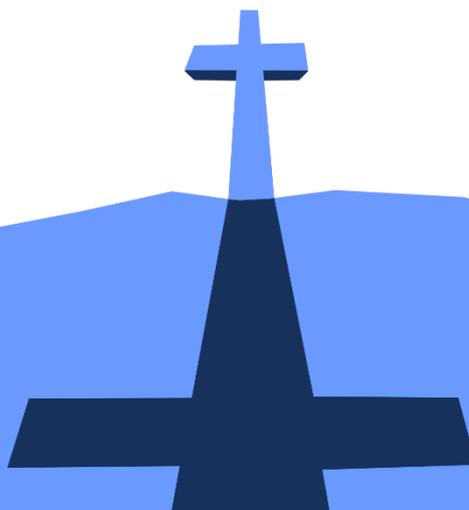
On Wednesday – we picture Jesus’s feet, dusty and weary.

On Thursday – we picture Jesus’s walk, bounding with enthusiasm telling a story and then shuffling under the weight of the world.

On Friday – we tune in to Jesus’s voice crying out on the cross ringing throughout time.

On Saturday – we picture the silence of Jesus’s body wrapped for burial.

On Sunday – Picture the cold tomb, a shrouded body, then look again and see the grave clothes lying – He is risen! Hallelujah! Rejoice, eat, celebrate, sing glory and hallelujahs to God! He is risen!





*Jesus, a man of great sorrow and joy
overcame the social distance between
us to make us a people of hope, his very
life a parable of divine love.*

May God bless you and renew you.

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Find out more:
www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk

Get in touch with us:
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