

BEGINNING TO FLOURISH

LENT & EASTER RESOURCE 2020



INTRODUCTION

Sanctuary First is an online worshipping community of the Church of Scotland open to anyone who is looking to explore or grow in their spiritual journey. We can be found at www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk, or on Facebook and Twitter, or you can download our App.

"Beginning to Flourish" is designed to encourage small groups of people to meet in cafes or homes to explore the essentials that make for a contented life. The period of Lent is a time leading up to Easter when traditionally Christians have tried to live a more simple lifestyle in order to focus on the things that truly matter in our lives.

This is a printable version of the study material that can be downloaded from:
sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/themes/beginning-to-flourish

The reason we have published this as a hard copy is to make it easier for those who are not able to get to a tablet or a smart phone, or indeed because some people prefer to have the material in book form and find it easier for reference purposes.

The material is designed to be read in conjunction with the daily prayers and Bible readings that can be located under Daily Worship on the Sanctuary First webpage (sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship), social media and our app.

We would encourage those taking part in the Connect Groups to use the daily online material in order to get the best use of this booklet. And also to use the weekly video introducing the themes. In addition to all this, take a look at the set of Lenten Disciplines which are listed at the back of the book for those who wish to do additional study.

We offer this material as a guide to work from but we encourage you to use it in a way that suits the needs of your group, adapting it to your circumstances. The questions are grouped for weekly sessions of perhaps 90 minutes but your group may want to follow a different pattern.

Here is a suggested order for a group meeting:

- Welcome
- Watch the short video introducing the weekly theme on the Sanctuary First site
- Invite group members to share from the reflections, prayers and readings from Sanctuary First that struck them or that they found especially helpful this week
- Go through the questions under the weekly themes
- Discuss any insights the group would like to pass on to the streamed weekly connect segments we will be piloting over Lent on our website
- Encourage the group to keep in touch through the week as you travel together

As in past years we have greatly enjoyed developing these themes and our main desire in producing this material is to invite a fresh look at what it means to flourish and be fruitful in your spiritual walk with God.

May God bless you as you journey through Lent and into Easter. May you find yourself "Beginning to Flourish" as you find yourself rooted in good soil.

Thanks to Albert Bogle and James Cathcart and Richard Begg for preparing the material, to Jack Steel for the art work on front cover and to Sanctus Media for overall design.



Beginning to Flourish

Over Lent and into Easter our overall theme will be "Beginning to Flourish". In order to flourish we have to consider our essential needs, so in March we will begin by exploring the fundamentals. In Part 1 – 'What We Really Need' we will be thinking about our most basic human necessities: breathing, thirst, shelter and belonging. Then in April, as we head into Holy Week and Easter, we will consider the generosity of our God who helps us to flourish. In Part 2 'My Father, The Gardener', we will see that our God doesn't just want us to survive - we have been created to grow, develop and blossom, to be rooted in love and become branches of the true vine.

Our Father God is a loving gardener who creates space for us to mature and explore and to ultimately flourish. Over these two months we will journey with God and one another exploring how the Ultimate Gardener finds us where we are –whatever soil we're in – and nourishes us tenderly. We are called to life, and to live it abundantly.

From the shoots that grow in and amongst the rubble and hard ground of desperate need, to the copious fruit of the groaning branches of the overflowing vineyard, our God cares for us and nurtures us. The journey can be seasonal and cyclical with times of growth and then times of pruning back. We might flourish for a time before finding ourselves back to first principles for a season. Times of bearing fruit and times of lying fallow. But through it all our Father the Gardener never abandons us, caring despite everything so that we survive, thrive and flourish, even becoming apprentice gardeners ourselves.

Part 1: What We Really Need, 1-28 March

Breathing • Shelter • Thirst • Belonging

Part 2: My Father, The Gardener, 29 March - 2 May

Bread of Life • Wine of the Spirit • Jesus the Vine • Apprentice Gardeners • Flourishing Together

Our readings will be a blend of Lectionary with an added focus on John's Gospel.

"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life".

John 4: 14b

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly".

John 10: 10b

"I am the vine, you are the branches".

John 15: 5a





A SUDDEN INTAKE OF BREATH

Conversation Starter

Breathing is one of our most vital needs, absolutely essential to life. It powers us through the day and often reveals our emotions. It can be smooth or ragged, deep or shallow, sudden or slow. Breath can be a form of nonverbal communication between people signalling to others how we are doing and what we are thinking. This week we will consider the animating principle of breath that carries us through our days — from hearty laughter to deep sobs, from the gentle sigh of relief to the deep gulps that get us up a massive hill.

In life saving, it is called the 'O Zone' when you enter cold water, get a fright and for a moment struggle to get your breath. The shock of the cold on the body is enough to take the breath from us. There are other times when the opposite happens and a sudden intake of breath means that we struggle for the next.

Repeatedly through Scripture we are reminded that God is the giver of that breath. Reflect as a group on those times when through fear or excitement that sudden intake of breath has made God more real!

Read Genesis 2: 7

"...and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The man came alive – a living soul!" (The Message)

Is it possible to be spiritually dead? What does it mean to become alive spiritually? Is it possible to be spiritually smothered by the actions of well meaning people?

Read Acts 9: 1

In Acts 9 the conversion of Saul is described by Luke. Before that moment of conversion Luke describes the mouth of Saul "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's Disciples".

Can you think of a contemporary personality, famous or within your circle of friends who has undergone a similar "change of heart" like Paul did?

As a group, or individually, spend time in prayer for people you know who may feel bullied or afraid to share what they really think because they feel threatened and powerless.

Read Exodus 2: 23-25

How often do we use our breath to call out to God in prayer? Could a sigh or even a swear word be a prayer? For God's people Israel, it was groaning in their slavery; no doubt the groans included some swear words?

Can you recall a time when your prayer has been unconventional? Can you think of a time when at your "wits' end" a prayer has been answered?

SHELTERING TOGETHER

Conversation Starter

What is shelter? To the soldier it is the back of an armoured vehicle, a basha in the field or a Colpro to protect from an incoming rocket attack. To a refugee it is a tent in a refugee camp. To the homeless it is a hostel bed or a doorway.

Share together your understanding of shelter. What characteristics should it have? What are the red lines you would not cross in the standard of shelter that you require? From those red lines, reflect on what are luxuries and what are essentials?

Take time to pray for those who are serving to provide the shelter and security that you enjoy – those deployed in forward operating bases on land, those hot bedding on the ships and boats of the Royal Navy and those on short notice to move in the air stations at high readiness.

Read Genesis 12: 1-4

Shelter provides a comfort zone for our protection and security. What if God called you like Abram to leave the comfort zones and the luxuries of your shelter to follow him. Abram was called from his country, his people and his family to follow a vision with no guarantee save that God would be with him.

Take time to share with others the places where you have lived and how it affected you? Could God have called you to these places? Where will be your next stop in God's schedule?

Read Psalm 27

Consider the positive statements about the provision of the Lord in the Psalm. How can we express thanks to God for the way he provides for us? What do you think it means to "dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life"?

Read Isaiah 58: 4-12

So often the focus today is on ourselves and making sure that we are okay. Isaiah's challenge is not about self but about others. Identify in the passage the things we are challenged to share together rather than do on our own. The Christian life is not an individual life but a collective life.

What resources could you share better with others, including shelter?

THIRSTING AFTER

Conversation Starter

Hunger and shelter feature highly in our needs but water is that basic need that is fundamental to our survival along with breath. Jesus illustrates the very human need of thirst in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. His human nature was very clearly displayed as he asked her for water but his divine nature was displayed when he offered himself to her as the living water every human needs to survive spiritually.

Discuss the feelings of physical thirst and the feelings related to spiritual thirst. How does thinking about our physical thirst help us to better understand our spiritual thirst?

Read Psalm 42: 1-2

"My soul thirsts for you, my God". What does your soul thirst for? What does it mean to thirst for the Lord?

Read John 4: 5-19

There are so many layers to this passage in John's Gospel. We see how Jesus needed to rest and quench his thirst. The cultural tension between a religious teacher and a woman whose faith and morality was suspect all adds to the inclusive way Jesus deals with people. He is not afraid to ask her for help. Reflect together on the different actions of Jesus and his use of water to bring about a very deep conversation about God his Father.

Where can you find help today if you feel spiritually thirsty? Spend some time thinking about the watering holes in your community where the human needs and the spiritual needs might be met and a thirst quenched.

Read John 4: 39-42

The most frustrating thing about a water leak in a house is trying to work out its source, because water travels, not in the most obvious route, but the direction of least resistance. We read in this passage that many Samaritans believed in God through the testimony of the woman.

Can you think of sometimes when the Lord has quenched your spiritual thirst or that of others? It may have been in the least expected way.

What opportunities exist for you to share the living water Jesus speaks of with others?

REALLY BELONGING

Conversation Starter

"This is belonging" is the strap line used in Army recruitment materials. "Born in X, made in the Royal Navy" draws on that sense of family and purpose and belonging.

In your group start thinking about what it means to belong and what different groups or organisations you belong to.

Belonging and being part of something is so important for us. We are not created to be on our own. We see this in the way Christians understand God. We talk of God as a Community of love: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is a challenging idea but worth discussing at least for a little while.

Read 1 Samuel 16: 1-13

So often we are identified in relation to someone else. "I am so and so's brother" or "I belong to such and such a family" or "I am from such and such a place".

Does God call each one of us individually for who we are to follow Him? Does God call everyone?

Read John 9: 1-41

The values we stand by shape the groups we often belong to and we are uncomfortable when those value systems are challenged or changed. The Pharisees were uncomfortable with what Jesus was doing. Their sense of belonging was being disrupted.

Have your Christian values disrupted your membership or sense of belonging to a community or organisation?

Read Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken". The trinity is a most beautiful image of belonging with the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Take each part of this passage and use it to share and think about those who are lonely or isolated. Apart from praying how can we support those who struggle to keep warm through homelessness or displacement from conflict? How can we support and help those who are overpowered by others and have no ability to pick themselves up?



GARDENER AND BAKER

Conversation Starter

'Wine, with its clear ties to the lifecycle of plants, its ability to evolve and change (to grow) and its delicate fragility in the face of danger (TCA, oxygen, light), fairly screams "alive." In today's overly sanitised, automated world, could our wine be more alive – perhaps even more 'human' – than us?'

So writes Courtney Cochran a wine enthusiast. But if wine is a metaphor for life so is bread. For it is also alive and evolving, moving from dough to the finished article; and bread like the vine begins its life planted in the ground. Jesus' choice of bread and wine as the symbols he wished to be remembered by are rich in meaning, just waiting for us to explore. Both need time to mature and grow into something that looks completely different from what is planted.

Have you ever tried making bread, if so how did it go? As well as taking time to mature and develop – what are other things that human beings and loaves of bread have in common?

Read Romans 8: 11

The most common yeast generally associated with winemaking is *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* which is also used in bread making. Do you think the way Paul describes the Holy Spirit could be likened to spiritual yeast working in the background bringing life and vitality to the human heart?

How can we become more aware of this process happening in our lives? See if you can think of specific examples of feeling enlivened by the Spirit, the active agent within.

Read John 6: 47-51

What does it mean to believe in Jesus?

How do you eat the bread of life? Is it literal or figurative?

Read 1 Kings 17: 7-16

Can you think of a time when resources have lasted a lot longer than common sense would suggest?

Does God, the Gardener and Baker, intervene literally to give us our daily bread?

WINE OF THE SPIRIT (HOLY WEEK)

Conversation Starter

It may seem strange to some to speak of the Holy Spirit during Holy Week. However it is important to understand that the person of the Holy Spirit in Scripture is understood to be at the very centre of the healing and reconciling power of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Some have interpreted the passage in John 19:31 where it says, "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished!' Then he bowed his head and gave up the Spirit" to mean he breathed out his Spirit into the world. Others see it as the cry of completion; declaring the finished work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in redeeming the world. Either way the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals the meaning of the cross to each individual person. Take time to visualise the meaning of love and sorrow meeting at a point in history for you, to reconcile you to your true Father.

The important thing to note as we consider the meaning of the death of Jesus is that we do so from the perspective of "My Father, the Gardener". The death of Jesus brings to life the work of the Holy Spirit — the yeast in the dough of humanity. Three days of waiting struggling and then victory! Death is defeated! God the Father has a new creation, a new Adam, Jesus the first fruits. He is the new wine, the bread of life 'proven'. Like yeast makes dough rise, so the Spirit causes him to rise and bring new life into our world. We cannot begin to understand the implications of Holy Week unless we view the story of the cross from the perspective of the Resurrection.

What words come to mind when you think of the Holy Spirit?

Read Matthew 26: 26-30

There was a symbolism in the phrase "He took a cup" which Matthew knew would speak volumes to the Jewish community. At Passover there are always four cups on the table. The Four Cups represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus 6: 6-7: "I will bring out", "I will deliver", "I will redeem", and "I will take". Take some time to talk through the meaning that you see in these four cups for our lives today: What are we being brought out to or where are we being delivered to in our lives at the moment? What needs to be redeemed? Where do we need to be taken? Are there other cups that we too have to take and drink from if we are to follow Jesus?

Read John 19: 30

So literally Jesus took the sour wine offered by the soldiers and in doing so he took the bitter cup of humanity's shame and brokenness. Often in life there are actions and rituals that help to underline the magnitude of an event. What do you think Jesus meant when he said "it is finished"?

Read Ephesians 5: 18-20

Here is an interesting twist. Paul reminds the Christians in Ephesus to make sure they are never drunk with the wine. They must look beyond the symbol to the reality — Jesus. It is the Sign of the Spirit at work in their lives that truly matters. When one is filled or intoxicated by the Spirit it leads to much joy and happiness.

So what is the difference between a symbol of something and a sign of something? (check out Len Sweet's introduction at the 2019 Re-imagining Church Conference).

JESUS THE VINE (EASTER!)

Conversation Starter

Every day is Easter Sunday for the Christian. Adam, the first human according to the narrative in Genesis, was created in a garden. Now on this first Easter Sunday in a garden we learn a new concept. We who have the Spirit of God working like yeast within us, will one day be resurrected after death. The resurrection of Jesus is the new beginning for humanity. He becomes the new Adam and we find ourselves once again with Mary feeling the breath of the Holy Spirit, revealing to us a new future.

As the Holy Spirit continues to work in our lives – what does the future hold for you this Easter?

Read John 20: 15- 16

There is something interesting going on here in this conversation between Mary and Jesus. This month we have been considering God as Gardener, so check out verse 15: the son of the Gardener is mistaken for the gardener! Only Mary doesn't realise the profundity of her assumption. At another level it all becomes clear to her when Jesus calls her by her name.

Here's a question, who then do you think Jesus is? The question is a loaded one we know. If we had phrased it, "Who do you think Jesus was?" it would be in the past tense, meaning perhaps an historical character.

So is Jesus an "is" or a "was"? Is he alive today or an interesting historical figure? If he is an "is" can he call you by name today, and if he did would you recognise his voice?

Read Hosea 14: 8-9

What an amazing passage this is. It points to the compassion and tenderness of God towards his creation. God is not a product of the human imagination or an idol made with human hands. He is the master designer, the gardener tending the beauty of his creation.

When you hear words like "God wants you to flourish" what does that mean to you? Wealth and success? Something else? What does it mean to be nurtured and cared for by God? How does God the gardener manage his garden? Again, you may want to check out John 15.

Read Leviticus 19: 10

We often want to maximise profit, efficiency, and extraction of natural resources at the expense of those resources and of one another. God challenges us to see things in a different way. What are the principles that should guide the way we use the limited natural resources in the world?

How can we support those in developing countries who depend on harvesting the resources of the natural world, so that they can survive without destroying the earth's eco-system?

What changes to our lifestyles are required to produce a more equitable world?

Have you ever considered the opportunities available to use your skills in a developing country?

APPRENTICE GARDENERS

Conversation Starter

Our Father the Gardener, invites us to be apprentice gardeners — helping one another to flourish. We have contributions to give — working for hope, restoration and righteousness alongside our Father the Ultimate Gardener.

During this week we will be highlighting the work of the Vine Trust, (www.vinetrust.org) in helping some of the most marginalised people in our world begin to flourish. This year is its 35th Anniversary. When Albert first established the Trust along with a few others, little did they think God would take that little branch of the vine, known as 'Branches' and grow it into what it is today.

Today the Trust offers opportunities for individuals to practise being God's "apprentice gardeners" in the Peruvian Amazon and in Tanzania. This week we will be focusing on what it might mean for more members of our Sanctuary First Community to begin to connect with the Trust and share their skills and resources. But we also hope that we will be open to the many alternative areas of service that God brings across our paths from day to day.

What are ways you can be an apprentice gardener for God, working in the world - God's garden - in your normal everyday life?

Read Amos 9: 14

Too often as Christians we read the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures in such a way that we spiritualise their prophecies. So we look at this passage in Amos and relate it to spiritual growth. We believe that God will restore and build his coming Kingdom. But what if God is calling us to help to build a more equitable world here and now? The Vine Trust is currently in the process of building a village in partnership with the African Inland Mission Church to give homes to some of the poorest and most marginalised people in East Africa — Children who have been orphaned by the dreaded AIDS Virus. The Trust supplies the funds and the volunteers to go and be labourers to local builders. Read more on the Trust's website about the medical ships that serve in the Amazon and Lake Victoria.

Is this the sort of thing you could do? Do you know someone else whom you could support? What are other ways we can help make these ancient words a contemporary reality?

Read Isaiah 61: 11

If God only has our hands to do the gardening in his world, how can we begin to be the agents enabling others to see their gifts grow in God's garden?

Could it be that areas of God's garden lie untended because we have failed to encourage others to get involved in creating and growing fruit bearing plants in the rich soil of God's love and grace? How can we spur one another on?

Read Ephesians 3: 16-21

So why is it that Christians are often found at the forefront of the fight for social and economic justice for the poor and marginalised? The answer of course is found in the passage we have just read. It is the love of Christ that constrains us to become involved.

Having read these passages what is it that you are being inspired to attempt to do for the glory of God?

FLOURISHING TOGETHER

As we work as apprentice gardeners we find that in the flourishing of one another we are nourished, in the nurturing of our neighbour, we ourselves blossom too.

Read Luke 13: 18

Never despise the day of small things. We love the passage in the Living Bible from the book of Zechariah 4:10 "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand".

So what is the small thing you are starting? Have you got your phone in your hand ready to start recruiting? If it is still only an idea why not share it? Ideas flourish together...

Read Philippians 4: 1

In today's busy world of instant achievement we often don't leave enough time for others around us to flourish. Flourishing takes time. And it requires nourishment and encouragement.

What are the qualities required of a community, or a family, or an individual that wants to flourish?

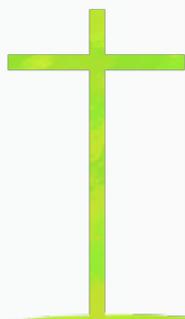
Read Luke 10: 25-37

We began this two-themed study thinking about What We Really Need so that we could go on to consider what it means to flourish. In order for the Samaritan to flourish he had to open himself up to the essential needs of the man on the side of the road. That wounded, abandoned, shaken soul needed to get his breath back, to have something to drink, to be given a shelter and be restored to a community. So that's exactly what the Samaritan did. And those are the same things all us wounded, abandoned, shaken souls need.

And the Samaritan's actions are our instruction, "do likewise".

How do the words of Jesus, "Go and do likewise" make you feel? How can we go about doing "likewise" in our day to day life?

LENT DISCIPLINES



As part of our Lent reflections this year we are encouraging one another to take on a Lent Discipline each week. These Disciplines are inspired by our rich Christian heritage and offer simple, straightforward ways of settling the heart, stilling the mind, and focusing our thoughts.

They invite you to do one thing every day for each week, the idea being that repetition allows you to build on the experience, noticing new things each day. If you forget or miss a day don't worry, just start again on the next day. Our hope is that by repeating the exercises you make space for rest, calm and new insights. Lent is an important time in the church calendar to slow down and make time to focus our minds on God.

Week 1 (begins 23 February , Ash Wednesday is 26 February)

THE TRANSFORMING QUIET

Every day this week spend 5 minutes in silence. Take a moment to still yourself before God and rest. Don't feel any pressure to think about anything in particular. Don't worry if you get distracted. After spending five minutes in silence you may feel like saying a prayer but it's up to you. Take the time to be in the silence before carrying on with the rest of your day.

Week 2 (begins Sunday 1 March)

THE TRANSFORMING BREATH

Each morning this week spend 5 minutes mindful of your breath, perhaps breathing slowly in and out. As you do this, consider the day ahead and think of all the places and situations your breath is going to take you today. You may wish to say a short prayer offering the upcoming day to God.

Week 3 (begins Sunday 8 March)

THE TRANSFORMING SHELTER

Think about your local area/town/city and reflect on the people living around who could be struggling or suffering, who perhaps can't rely on their shelter or accommodation. Commit to pray for your neighbourhood and those same people every day this week.

Week 4 (begins Sunday 15 March)

THE TRANSFORMING DRINK

Make time every day this week to thank God for a drink, whether a blessed cuppa, a cool water or a glass or two with a friend. Think about how Jesus lived a human life and regularly drank with others. Give thanks for the drinks you have and the chances you have to share them with others.

Week 5 (begins Sunday 22 March)

THE TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

Every day this week read Hebrews 10: 24-25. After reading those two verses consider what you can do today to spur on others to love and goodness. Perhaps there is someone you have been meaning to get in touch with, or to catch up with.

Week 6 (begins Sunday 29 March)

THE TRANSFORMING BREAD

In April we are exploring how our Father God is both a Gardener and a Baker. Our Creator has created a creative humanity able to make things: from a loaf of bread to an impressionist oil painting, from a tall imposing tower to a cosy woolly scarf.

Each day this week take a short amount of time to "make something". Interpret "make" however you like — make a loaf of bread or paint a picture, start sewing or knitting something and work on it everyday. Perhaps your making is "making time for someone" or "making a difference in your neighbourhood". Get creative — the key is to make something (or make something happen) that wouldn't otherwise be.

Week 7 (begins Sunday 5 April, Holy Week begins Monday 6 April)

THE TRANSFORMING WINE

The Son of God became one of us and had a human body. Every day this week take a moment to consider the life of Jesus.

- Sunday reflect on the everyday wine of the everyday family who brought Jesus up.
- Monday reflect on the special wine that would have been shared at social occasions with family and friends as Jesus grew up.
- Tuesday reflect on the wine of the Spirit that Jesus, even before the cross, would have known would come at Pentecost
- Wednesday reflect on the wineskins and the other humble everyday objects that made up Jesus' human earthly life.
- Thursday reflect on the wine of the Last Supper and the wine we continue to drink at Communion.
- Friday reflect on the sour wine of Good Friday, offered to Jesus on the Cross.
- Saturday think of the bitter wine of Holy Saturday as Jesus' weary wounded followers gathered together in grief.

EASTER SUNDAY 12 April

Picture the empty tomb. Picture the friendly Gardener looking on, a smile playing across his face (read John 20: 1-18). Rejoice, eat, celebrate, treat yourself and others! Sing glory and hallelujahs to God! He is risen!

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Sanctuary First is an aspiring congregation of the Church of Scotland, Falkirk Presbytery (a charity registered in Scotland, charity no. SC018587).