



BEGINNING TO FLOURISH

LENT & EASTER RESOURCE



Theme Resource Pack
Lent/Easter 2025
(2 March - 27 April)

Beginning to Flourish Part 1: Introduction

On the cross love was stripped bare. Everything had been taken from Jesus. He had been ripped from his community, deprived of food and water, exposed to the elements, his final breath taken from his body, until all that remained was love. But this love is the transforming love at the heart of the universe — the most powerful thing — the love of God. A love which brings hope and restoration out of despair and suffering — a love freely given so that humanity can flourish!

Our theme for Lent and Easter 2025 *Beginning to Flourish* explores the fundamental things we need to live: breath, shelter, water and belonging. In Part 1 'What We Really Need' we travel with Jesus through the wilderness and reflect on how we all share the same basic needs — even Jesus himself did as God amongst us in human form. In Part 2 'My Father the Gardener', as we head into Holy Week and Easter, we will see what happens when love is stripped bare on the cross in an act of incredible compassion and sacrifice only to burst once more into life and hope. God doesn't just want us to survive he wants us to thrive! We have been created to grow, develop and blossom — rooted in love, branches of the true vine. And in those branches we create room to shelter and nourish one another connected through Christ — ready to flourish.

Part 1: What We Really Need

Life is so complicated until it isn't — until it's just about the next breath, some clean water, somewhere to stay, or a community to belong to. That gasp of air, that cold glass of water, that roof, that place you can simply *be*. What do we learn about our God from breathing deeply? Or from catching our breath? How about when we quench our thirst? Or when we feel safe? Or from when we lose that sense of security? As Jesus fasted in the desert wilderness, surely a dry and unforgiving place, these needs would have been on his mind. He was fully divine but yet — incredibly — also fully human. Jesus speaks with authority in our lives as one who knows what it is to fight for breath, to long for water, to be without a permanent address, to find oneself forsaken, betrayed and abandoned. But he also knows what it is to laugh, to drink in celebration, to share hospitality, and form lasting friendships.

What can we discover about our God and ourselves when we take things down to the basics and consider our most fundamental needs?

Weekly Overview

- A sudden intake of breath — *animated for expressive life*
- Sheltering together — *forever welcomed by God*
- Thirsting after — *the physical and spiritual intertwined*
- Really belonging — *being acknowledged, recognised, celebrated*

This is a theme remix revisiting and reimagining material we first developed in 2020.

Format

Every month we have a God-given theme delving into different aspects and areas of faith. Over the course of 2024 these themes connect and take us on a faith journey out into the wonders of life with Jesus. Our themes shape our Daily Worship, Sunday Live streams and all sorts of other creative things we get up to! Each week runs Sunday - Saturday and each has a series of daily Bible readings and prompts for reflection.

A sudden intake of breath — *animated for expressive life* (Week 1, 2 March)

Introduction: 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. This Lent we also anticipate the cross and remember the final incredible breath of Jesus, “It is completed.”

Setting the scene: Running, laughing, sighing, sobbing, yelling, cheering!

Seeds to sow: This week think how you can support the work of organisations that help people living with chronic illnesses.

- 1. Genesis 2: 7 Breath brings life.** From first to last... we are reliant on our breathing for our living. All our breaths — of anger and happiness, frustration and scepticism, wonder and delight — come from God.
- 2. Exodus 34: 29-35 & 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 A sudden intake of breath.** The divine can be breathtaking as well as breath-giving! Through Jesus Christ we are able to stand like Moses, unveiled, our breath steadying and falling into rhythm with the Creator of the universe in prayer.
- 3. Acts 9: 1 Breathing murder.** Today we think of the laboured breaths of hatred, vengeance and cruelty. Those times when we are running on adrenaline and spoiling for a conflict.
- 4. Psalm 32 (Ash Wednesday) Sharp breaths of guilt.** Consider the tormented suffering of verse 3. When we suffer physically, emotionally or spiritually our breathing is affected — showing ourselves and others that something isn't right. This Ash Wednesday we remember that our breath expresses so much of our inner world. It daily broadcasts our essential vulnerability, none of us can get by without oxygen.
- 5. Romans 5:12-21 Victory over the final breath.** Our last breath is no longer our last breath thanks to the breath of Jesus! When love is stripped bare on the cross Jesus will have his breath torn from him, but we know that isn't the end of the story.
- 6. Exodus 2: 23-25 God, creator of the universe, takes notice of you.** Just as God heard the groans and sighs of the captive Israelites, he hears your inhales and exhales, your effort and frustration. God, majesty of majesties, is attentive to **you** — not just what you say, but how you are, the non-verbal cues that say as much (or more) about you as your words. God has breathed into you to give you life and God does not waste his breath.
- 7. Genesis 21: 1-6 Infectious laughter.** One of the gifts of our breath is that it carries our laughter to one another — sparking recognition, empathy, and solidarity.

Sheltering together — *forever welcomed by God* (Week 2, 9 March)

Introduction: The desire for a roof runs deep. We all need somewhere to lay our head. We need protection from the elements, but also somewhere we can let down our guard, *feel* safe and sound. Stress about a lack of shelter, or the quality or security of that shelter gets to us like little else does. This is why shelter makes for such a powerful metaphor of God's love for us. Even when every other shelter has let us down, or fallen through, or kicked us out — God still welcomes us.

Setting the scene: A roof offering protection from the rain.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations that work to provide shelter and support to those who need it.

- 1. Genesis 12: 1-4 Leaving shelter.** Leaving what you have known and stepping out into the promise of somewhere new can be a deeply unsettling and nerve-racking experience.
- 2. Psalm 91: 1-12 & Luke 4: 1-13 Safe.** This psalm, an ancient poem about our essential safety in God — that no matter what God will be with us and for us — is twisted by the devil in the Matthew reading. He urges Jesus to act recklessly risking his life relying on a Psalm 91 bubble to bail him out. Jesus promptly tells the devil he has completely missed the point. This psalm is not telling us we become invulnerable to pain and harm but it does tell us when life feels fragile and brutal and dangerous that God will always find us in the midst of disaster and calamity — we will not be lost and forgotten — we will be gathered in, sheltered.
- 3. Psalm 121 God, our ultimate shelter day and night.** A beautiful enigmatic phrase, “the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.”
- 4. Psalm 27: 4-5 One thing.** What does it mean to dwell with God?
- 5. John 3: 1-17 Seeking shelter in the dead of night.** Nicodemus, like many of us, finds himself at night, seeking shelter with Jesus, bringing his doubts and curiosity.
- 6. Isaiah 58: 4-12 Shelter as a shared resource.** Our wellbeing is tied up with the wellbeing of others. Shelter should not be a zero-sum game, where we can only gain at someone else's loss. Rather, it should be a cooperative exercise where the more secure each of us are independently — the more secure we all are corporately.
- 7. Ezekiel 17: 22-23 A shelter for every kind.** Expansive, inclusive, natural, splendid.

Thirsting after — *the physical and spiritual intertwined* (Week 3, 16 March)

Introduction: Thirst is one of the most pressing forces in our lives. Needs like breathing, for most of us, are so automatic we rarely think about them unless we are in an emergency. Others like the need for shelter and belonging are crucially important but are often taken for granted until they are absent; but our thirst is a pressing need we negotiate every day that can override everything else. It can be hard to relax, concentrate, or even complete basic tasks when our thirst is overwhelming us. Our need to drink is a constant reminder of our bodies and their precious vulnerability. We will explore what it is to thirst spiritually and physically and conclude this week by spending the last two days looking at the incredible encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the well in John's Gospel.

Setting the scene: Fresh water in a large pitcher being poured into glasses.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations that help people around the world access clean life-saving water.

1. **Exodus 17: 1-7 Water from the rock.** When we are thirsty we can become irritable and lose our sense of perspective, uncomfortably aware of the pressing needs of our bodies.
2. **Psalm 42: 1-2 As the deer...** Thirst is a powerful metaphor for longing for God; something you can take for granted until suddenly you are desperate.
3. **Luke 9: 28-36 Thirsting for the moment.** Spiritually, when we thirst, when we long for God, the desire is often to chase the moment like Peter does here. Peter suddenly awake wants to freeze the moment — build a shrine right there and then but the Gospel account tersely tells us “He did not know what he was saying.” Peter has missed the point, Jesus isn't static in one place, they aren't to stay on the mountain. Part of following Jesus is realising that Jesus doesn't hang around in the same place — we need to trust him to move.
4. **Philippians 2: 5-8 Jesus knows what it is to be human.** Jesus speaks to us with authority — the authority of one who has known terrible thirst, deep longing, stinging rejection, the hurt of a lonely trial. When Jesus comes alongside us in our times of thirst he comforts us from a place of experience, God becoming one of us.
5. **Revelation 22: 17 The water of life.** It's priceless.
6. **John 4: 5-19 Quenching our thirst.** The scene is set for a life changing encounter.
7. **John 4: 20-29, 39-42 Jar left empty... mind full!** Meeting the messiah can change your priorities. What starts as a story leads to a personal encounter. Who are we sharing a cuppa with and telling the story...?

Really belonging — *being acknowledged, recognised, celebrated*

(Week 4, 23 March)

Introduction: We need to breathe, we need shelter, we need water... but we also need to belong, we need to feel acknowledged, recognised, even celebrated. Many people — who can breathe easily, have plenty to drink, and secure homes to live in — suffer intolerably for not having a sense of belonging. And many who struggle to breathe, or to find proper shelter, or clean water, still feel the warmth of belonging. God always acknowledges us, recognises us and celebrates us, because we belong!

Setting the scene: A simple meal with people gathered together.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations that work to counter isolation and loneliness.

- 1. Isaiah 55: 1-9 *Come for the drink, stay for the belonging!*** A core part of belonging somewhere is feeling acknowledged — that you are noticed and that your needs are recognised. This is true spiritually as well as socially.
- 2. Psalm 23: 5-6 *Being flatmates with God!*** This is a very popular psalm that we often turn to. But let's set aside the agriculture metaphor in the first part and instead consider the flat-share dynamic at the end! What does it mean to dwell in the house of the Lord — on an on-going basis?
- 3. Ephesians 5: 8-14 *Living as children of light.*** Cultivating a sense of belonging in goodness, righteousness and truth.
- 4. John 9: 1-41** (*Our Daily Worship writer is invited to choose a verse selection from this range*). ***Depends how you see it...*** A scripture about learning to see... but it's not so much the blind man who learns to see in this encounter as the others who dismissed him as a beggar or a sinner and never recognised his humanity. The blind man, even before his healing, sees better than the Pharisees who want to draw lines of who is in and who is out..
- 5. Hebrews 10: 24-25 *The importance of keeping in touch.*** How can we spur one another on in our daily lives to help develop a sense of belonging?
- 6. Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 *Working together.*** 'Teamwork makes the dream work.' (Something admittedly it's hard to imagine the author of Ecclesiastes saying...)
- 7. Matthew 25: 34-40 *A stranger welcomed, a friend discovered.*** Hospitality is meant to be deep in the warp and weft of the tapestry of life (see also the threefold cord in the Ecclesiastes reading above).

Beginning to Flourish Part 2: Introduction

As Lent draws to a conclusion and we head into Holy Week and Easter we will consider the generosity of our God who wants us to flourish. God doesn't just want us to survive he wants us to thrive! We have been created to grow, develop and blossom — rooted in love, branches of the true vine. Over this theme we are on a journey 'Beginning to Flourish' with God and one another, exploring how the Ultimate Gardener finds us where we are — whatever soil we are in — and nourishes us tenderly.

Part 2: My Father The Gardener

God has given us within ourselves, within our friendships, within our communities, within our world — the means to live and to live productively and creatively. Who we are and the choices we want to make matter. We are not just cogs in a machine or workers in a hive. We are individual and idiosyncratic. There has never been and there never will be someone just like you with your combination of personality and experience and genetics. You are a unique creation and God wants you to live but also to feel fulfilled in that life — able to blossom into the fullest version of you.

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. When love was stripped bare on the cross — when one by one Jesus was torn from his community, pulled from shelter, deprived of water, and ultimately his breath — it was not the beginning of the end, it was only the end of the beginning. In God's eternal love are the seeds of our flourishing.

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.

It's time to flourish...

Weekly Overview

- Gardener and Baker — *considering the Bread of Life*
- Longing and everlasting love — *a well watered garden*
- Love stripped bare — *on the cross*
- Jesus the Vine — *becoming branches ourselves*
- Flourishing Together — *reflecting on living so that all may flourish*

Gardener and Baker — *considering the Bread of Life* (Week 5, 30 March)

Introduction: This week we are going to think about the Bread of Life. Bread is hugely important throughout history and across the world, in various forms. It is both an everyday staple and a special symbol of sustenance itself. Just as bread is worked and proved and animated — so are we. So bread is a metaphor. Bread is a story. But bread is also of course — food.

Setting the scene: Making bread in a warm friendly kitchen.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations that work to alleviate hunger and scarcity — both locally and internationally.

- 1. John 6: 25-40 I am.** For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. This links back to the experience of Jesus in the wilderness we looked at in Luke 4 where the devil tempts Jesus to turn a stone to bread and Jesus replies “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’ Jesus speaks here of true, eternal sustenance.
- 2. John 6: 47-59 The Bread of Life.** As we anticipate Holy Week we reflect on the bittersweetness of breaking bread in Communion. On the cross love will be stripped bare, “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”
- 3. Ezekiel 37:1-14 Add a little yeast.** The breath of God causes dry bones to rise, like how a live culture causes dough to rise when making bread..
- 4. Psalm 130 Waiting for the new rising...** Bakers ‘prove’ their bread, giving time for the yeast to do its work. The time of anticipation while you wait can be nerve-racking as each prove is an organic process. The baker has to step back and let go, trusting the process. Is ‘proving’ a skill we could cultivate in other parts of our lives?
- 5. Romans 8: 6-11 The active agent within.** Without the fizz and pop of a live yeast culture, and the skilled hands of a baker, bread is somewhat... flat. As leavened bread is enlivened so are we — by the Spirit.
- 6. Joshua 5:9-12 When the manna runs out.** A people reconnecting with the food chain! Reforging a mutually sustaining link to the ground beneath their feet. Sometimes in our lives we’d love the manna to just fall down at our feet, but the everyday wonder of food is how it embeds us in God’s creation. Our Father the Gardener wants us to know the earth and live with it not just on it.
- 7. 1 Kings 17: 7-16 Something to eat.** Bread itself is an everyday miracle — keeping people alive and bringing them together.

Longing and everlasting love — a well watered garden (Week 6, 6 April)

Introduction: This week we are travelling through the vivid picture of return and renewal drawn in Jeremiah 31: 1-14 with its well watered garden. Deep in the human heart is a longing that's almost impossible to answer, almost impossible to fulfil. In God and through God we find something big enough and wide enough to answer — everlasting love. It is this love that will sustain Jesus through Holy Week, the cross and the tomb to resurrection!

Setting the scene: A well tended garden bursting with life.

Seeds to sow: As a gardener works to create a system of mutually supporting life growing together — how can we support a myriad of environmental organisations working to heal our world for all to thrive?

1. **Jeremiah 31: 1-2 Rest.** Finding favour in the wilderness.
2. **Jeremiah 31: 3-4 Rebuilt with everlasting love.** Nothing is better at building, and especially at *rebuilding*, than love.
3. **Jeremiah 31: 5-6 Replanting vineyards.** Laborious hearty work. Vineyards take a lot of time and effort, it can be painstaking work to get them up and running.
4. **Jeremiah 31: 7-8 Returning.** Gathered in from all corners.
5. **Jeremiah 31: 9-10 Restoration.** Imagine if *unscattered* was a word, not just putting back together but *un-scattering*, undoing *and* unwinding back.
6. **Jeremiah 31: 11-14 Redeemed, a well watered garden.** A compelling vision of healing and new growth.
7. **John 12: 1-8 Surprising gift!** Now we hurtle from the Old Testament forward to the 1st century and this incredible scene. How do we read it in the context of Jeremiah 31? Where do we see rest, rebuilding, replanting, returning, restoring and redemption in this interaction? How would the scent of the perfume have lingered with Jesus through the week ahead?

Love stripped bare — *on the cross* (Week 7, 13 April, Holy Week)

Introduction: At the beginning of Lent Jesus went into the wilderness and in Holy Week Jesus is about to go into another wilderness, everything is going to be stripped away from him — belonging, shelter, water and finally his breath — but the one thing that isn't taken away from him is his everlasting love. Betrayed, rejected and suffering but because Jesus is loved by the Father — he and the Father are one — he can rebuild love in the human heart. The one thing that cannot be taken away from him is identity and his identity is love.

Setting the scene: Pouring wine into cups.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support Christians facing oppression and hostility around the world.

- 1. Luke 19:28-35 & Luke 22: 39-46 In the shadow of the Mount of Olives.** There is a bittersweet echo between these readings on Palm Sunday and into Holy Week, the scent of olives in the air. In the first reading something is provided without asking for it, and in the second something is asked for but not provided.
- 2. Isaiah 53 Suffering servant.** A heartbreaking picture of love brought to its knees. Jesus takes on our pain and sorrow and rejection with the voice of experience.
- 3. John 13:1-17, 31b-35 The bare hands of love.** Jesus doesn't just talk about openhanded, openhearted love — he lives it out in this incredible scene.
- 4. John 13: 36-38 & 18: 15-18, 25-27 A rooster cries.** Peter one of Jesus's most vocal followers, falls silent. For Peter is entering his own wilderness as his certainties crumble and his Lord is led away.
- 5. Luke 23: 32-43 Love whispers.** Even as love is being stripped bare it manages a whisper as Jesus invites another suffering man to paradise.
- 6. John 19: 28-30 Final drink, final breath.** The essential needs that unite all humanity, that we looked at in the first half of our theme, are one by one taken from Jesus. He has been ripped from community, he is without shelter, without sustenance. Love is stripped completely bare. But in the hollow of this searing loss we remember the resurrection to come that will return these things to Jesus, as love triumphant, will have the final word.
- 7. John 19: 38-42 Lain in a garden.** Nicodemus comes once again to Jesus under cover of darkness, but this time rather than looking for shelter he is looking to shelter Christ himself. Joseph of Arimathea brings the body and Nicodemus brings the spices for burial. In the garden they sow with tears not knowing they will reap with joy — for under the earth something is moving, something is happening, love has been stripped bare — but it has not been defeated!

Jesus the Vine — *becoming branches ourselves* (Week 8, 20 April, Easter)

Introduction: Love has been stripped bare, but Jesus the vine still rooted deep in love bursts back into life! Love will flourish! As we look around the garden this Easter with our Father God the Gardener — let's look to the vine — Jesus — that runs through everything and be the branches that reach out widely under the rising and the setting of the sun. We breathe in, drink deeply, stand together in an arbour. It is not the beginning of the end. It is only the end of the beginning. It is time to flourish.

Setting the scene: Vines growing on a trellis, sheltering those below.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations that work to show Jesus's compassion and care in the world.

1. **John 20: 1-18 'Supposing him to be the gardener...'** How often do we miss Jesus? When we're looking for fireworks and bolts of lightning do we miss the quiet presence of Jesus taking care of the garden, tending the branches?
2. **John 15: 1 'My Father the gardener'.** When Mary supposed Jesus to be the gardener, was she in fact partly right? How does the metaphor of gardening help us think about Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
3. **John 15: 2-11 'I am the vine'.** If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches — we are in some sense bundled up in an extension of the divine — our lives are a human outworking of God's Kingdom and heavenly purpose.
4. **John 15: 12-17 Loving branches.** Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us. We are loving branches of his vine, reaching ever outwards.
5. **Acts 10: 39-43 Preach, testify!** It may be that how people spot the vine today is through catching sight of a branch, a you shaped branch!
6. **Matthew 20: 1-16 Challenging our perception of 'fair'.** When branches start looking suspiciously at other branches on the vine...
7. **Leviticus 19: 10 Respecting the vineyard.** 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.

Flourishing together — *reflecting on living so that all may flourish*

(Week 9, 27 April)

Introduction: 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 the Ultimate Gardener. 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.

Setting the scene: Rolling sleeves up in a garden, music playing, people laughing.

Seeds to sow: This week consider how you can support organisations working towards fair, compassionate and just solutions to the problems that face our global environment.

- 1. John 20: 19-23 Empowered by the Holy Spirit.** Jesus on the cross was torn from his community, exposed to the elements, deprived of water, and finally his breath... but through the resurrection these things have all come back. This moment in the upper room sharing a roof, meal and breath with his disciples is a beautiful restoration of what has been taken. And it on his breath that a fascinating new chapter for humanity is going to unfold through the Holy Spirit.
- 2. Amos 9: 13-14 A restoration-people following a God of restoration.** Where can we plant gardens and vineyards and rebuild ruins?
- 3. Isaiah 61: 11 Shoots of righteousness.** As earthly gardeners we can't make the shoots themselves grow but we can work to cultivate an environment where they can take root and blossom.
- 4. Ephesians 3: 16-21 Rooted in love.** The importance of remembering our roots in love.
- 5. Luke 13: 18-19 God's Kingdom is somewhere you can make a nest.** Considering nesting with God.
- 6. Philippians 3:17-4:1 Helping one another to stand firm.** Citizens of Heaven working together.
- 7. Luke 10: 25-37 Coming full circle.** We began at the start of Lent thinking about what we really need so that from that basis we could consider what it means to flourish. That wounded, abandoned, shaken soul in Jesus's story need to get his breath back, to have something to drink, to be given 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." This is how we act as apprentice gardeners — gently nurturing one another in a Kingdom that begins to flourish one shaken soul at a time.