

# LENT COURSE 2021

WHERE'S THE PROOF THAT GOD EXISTS?

WHAT'S THE POINT OF GOING TO CHURCH?

MIRACLES? RESURRECTION? COME OFF IT!

## HOW TO EXPLAIN YOUR FAITH

WHAT GOD WOULD ALLOW SUFFERING?

# WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

... this course is an opportunity to gently explore a sense of God in relation to ourselves and others, providing an opportunity to take a fresh look at what people outside the church think about us and how, in our words and actions, we might communicate something of why God and the church is important to us. Many of us find the idea of 'evangelism' a scary prospect or don't know where to start when asked to explain what and why we believe.

These learning sessions are offered so that we might grow in confidence if or when we are asked about our faith – *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect”* 1 Peter 3.15

The **opportunities** presented from working in this way are for each one of us to develop a deeper sense of what we might be called to do both together and as individuals. The course is a time for taking on more of the habits and values of the Gospel to form our way of living.

**Together** – there will be conversations for us to share, insights, prayer and the chance to develop confidence one with another, to laugh and be people who want to know more of our part in God's purposes for the world.

**Key aim** - We hope that, by the end of this short course, we will each have a fresh understanding of our faith, what it means to us and how we might share it in word and action.

# HOW DOES IT WORK?

This course will run on Zoom, on Sunday afternoons. Some elements will take place altogether as a large group, and some elements will take place in smaller groups or 'breakout rooms'.

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Each session will follow this general pattern:

WELCOME

OPENING PRAYER

REVIEW

STARTER

SCRIPTURE

TO THINK ABOUT

ACTIVITY

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

PRAYER

# SESSION ONE

## GETTING STARTED

### WELCOME

### PRAYER

#### ***A time for turning round...***

Truly yours we are and to you we will return  
Help this to be a time of turning round and beginning again.  
Through the 40 days of Lent, help us to follow you  
And to find you: in the discipline of praying;  
In whatever we deny ourselves  
And whatever we set ourselves to learn to do.  
Help us to discover you  
In our loneliness and our community  
In our emptiness and our fulfilment  
In our sadness and in our laughter.  
Help us to find you when we are lost.  
Help us to follow you on the journey to Jerusalem  
From the waving palms of the people's hope  
To their rejection, to the cross and to the empty tomb.  
Help us, carrying your cross, to be signs of your Kingdom

*Jan Sutch Pickard, Eggs and Ashes,  
Wild Goose Publications*

## COURSE INTRODUCTION

In these sessions we are inviting you to put yourselves in the shoes of people who are outside the church and know very little about us, or the Christian faith. We invite you to approach the 'starters' from a place of curiosity – what do people actually think about the church and the faith? How might we respond to their attitudes, ideas, questions? It is tempting to think we either have all the answers or are not able to deal with these kinds of questions. This course is an opportunity to think together about what we actually believe in a non-judgmental space so that we can share these thoughts and ideas, our faith with one another and with those on the edges of faith.

## REVIEW

We keep in mind and perhaps share what it is that we are hoping for in these sessions. Generally we might share what has happened to each of us during the week.

## STARTER – WHAT THEY SAY

I've got most of the things I want in life. I could always do with more, of course, but basically life is fine as it is.

What is it about Christianity that makes it important? I just can't see where it might make contact with my life and what I'm interested in.

Religious people usually give me answers before I've got questions, I don't know if I've got any questions anyway.

Christians go on about a 'spiritual journey' but that makes far too many assumptions. I'm not even sure there's a journey to go on.

The Church doesn't come into it. I just live my life as I believe I should live it, and make my decisions and hope they're good ones, and have respect for other people. That's it.

- How do you feel when you hear statements like this?
- Which statement strikes you the most?
- How would you like to respond?

## THINKING TOGETHER

Basic human experiences such as love, wonder, gratitude, soul-searching and tragedy invite us to look more deeply at life. Deep experiences seem to point to life on a bigger map, a map that might be the most accurate and useful one we can find for the journey we have to make. For many people this map is called 'faith'.

Faith is important because:

it asks question about meaning

it asks the question about truth

it asks, 'how to be good' and, how to be good *together*.

## SCRIPTURE

*Two people will read through the passage below with a pause in between. During the reading and in the silence around them listen for what strikes you about what you hear.*

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

*Luke 19.2-10*

- Share together a word or phrase that stands out for you.
- What strikes you about this story?

## ACTIVITY

### Faith story timeline

Think back through your life to the significant events that have happened, mark each one on the line in chronological order. There's no need for great detail, just a quick note.

You might like to place events higher or lower on the page to signify whether an event was a high point or a low point in your life.

Once you have completed your timeline, go back through it and think of the times where you were aware of God working in your life.

In pairs, share one thing you've noticed about your timeline.

## PRAYER

We finish by saying together:

*All*      **Almighty Father,**  
**We thank you for the joy of knowing you**  
**and for the privilege of sharing in your mission.**  
**Help us today to learn more about ourselves**  
**and each other,**  
**and give us the confidence, courage and sensitivity**  
**to share the good news of your Son Jesus**  
**with those around us.**  
**For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ**  
**and for your glory. Amen.**



## THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

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Message in a Bottle story.

Building Blocks exercise to take away.

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## BLESSING AND SENDING OUT

For all that God can do within us

For all that God can do without us

**Thanks be to God**

For all in whom Christ lived before us

For all in whom Christ lives beside us

**Thanks be to God**

For all the Spirit wants to bring us

For where the Spirit wants to send us

**Thanks be to God**

And the blessing of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit

Be with us this day, this Lent and always.

**Amen**

Christ has promised to be with us in the world

As in our worship

**Amen, we go to meet him.**

*Ruth Burgess from Pattern of Our Days*

# SESSION TWO

## WHY BELIEVE IN GOD?

### WELCOME

### OPENING PRAYER

Almighty Father,  
We thank you for the joy of knowing you  
and for the privilege of sharing in your mission.  
Help us today to learn more about ourselves  
and each other,  
and give us the confidence, courage and sensitivity  
to share the good news of your Son Jesus  
with those around us.  
For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and for your glory. Amen.

### WEEKLY PROCESS & CONFIDENTIALITY

As we talk and listen to each other over this time, we ask people why they've come and what their hopes and fears are about being in this group. We talk about confidentiality within the group, committing ourselves to the process of learning together this Lent, listening to one another with respect and kindness.

## REVIEW

Spend a few minutes talking about the opening 'Launch' session in church. Is there one word or phrase that struck or stayed with you from the Launch? If people were unable to be there - consider spending some time talking it through.

## STARTER – WHAT THEY SAY

How can you believe in a God with no evidence?

Religion used to give people the answers we need; now we have science.

Now we understand evolution, how can people believe the story about Adam & Eve?

God didn't make us; we made God.

Richard Dawkins says: "I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world."

"I don't believe in God, but I believe in something—a higher power"

→ How do you feel when you hear statements like this?

→ Which statement strikes you the most?

## SCRIPTURE

*Ask 2 people to read through the passage below. Read it once then pause then the next person reads it. Allow for some silence around the readings and listen for what strikes you about what you hear.*

Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the Lord,  
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honour and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures forever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

*Psalms 111:1-9 (NRSV)*

## TO THINK ABOUT

- Which lines from Psalm 111 jump out at you?
- How does God reveal himself to us?
- Is there evidence for the love you have for your spouse/child/friend?
- Fake News: how do people believe anything?
- “The rationale of the universe has been implanted by God, as has mankind’s ability to understand it”— (Ælbert of York) – what do you think about this?

## ACTIVITY

In groups, discuss and put the words below into the RELIGION or SCIENCE column. When each group has done this share between the groups what you've put where and why.

HOW                  TRADITION                  VALUE                  HYPOTHESIS  
 OBSERVATION      PROCESS                  REALITY                  INSTINCT  
 PROOF              REVELATION                  QUALITY                  NATURE  
                  SPIRITUAL      FAITH                  WHY                  TESTING  
 PURPOSE              CONVICTION                  UNDERSTANDING      TRUST  
 TRUTH                  IMPORTANCE                  QUANTITY                  PASSION

RELIGION	SCIENCE

## THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Science and religion are often set up as alternatives, but so often there is an overlap. These are two different ways of trying to understand the world around us, but it doesn't mean that if one way is right, that the other is wrong. Science tells us so much about the world we love, and helps us to know more about our life. One thing we do know is that we could never prove that God exists.

But—seeing is believing: can we believe what we can't prove? Yes! The whole point of faith is that it isn't just learning about facts; it's having *faith* in something unlikely and unexplainable. People don't decide to have a faith because it seems like a sensible or rational thing to do; God reveals himself to us in all sorts of ways, and when we're open to it, God's presence gives us so much more than cold, hard facts.

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I can look at a rainbow and I know that when white light hits water droplets in the sky, the light is dispersed into different colours which spread out in an arc—and I also say “Thank you God for the rainbow.”

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The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

*Psalm 19*

## PRAYER

*Have a time of silence to offer to God what you have discussed. You may like to pray out loud or offer a word or phrase that has struck you during the session. We end the time of prayer with this:*

Lord, show us a revelation of your glory.  
Reveal to us things You have done  
– the miracles, the signs, the wonders.  
Lord, show us a revelation of your Work,  
through our senses, life experiences,  
and through others.  
Lord, show us a revelation of your Word.  
May the obscure and confusing things  
become clear to me.  
Everything we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

*For the next session it will be useful to revisit the timeline you did at the launch session or the Building Blocks exercise you were given to take away. Have a look at them before Session 3 and bring them to the next session if possible.*



# SESSION THREE

## WHY BELIEVE IN JESUS?

### WELCOME

### OPENING PRAYER

Almighty Father,  
We thank you for the joy of knowing you  
and for the privilege of sharing in your mission.  
Help us today to learn more about ourselves  
and each other,  
and give us the confidence, courage and sensitivity  
to share the good news of your Son Jesus  
with those around us.  
For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and for your glory. Amen.

### REVIEW

Anything that has stayed with you through the week since the last session?

## STARTER – WHAT THEY SAY

What's so special about this Jesus? Just one in a long line of brilliant moral and spiritual leaders. He might have been a great teacher, or leader, but it's just like us admiring Shakespeare or Socrates, and nothing more than that – certainly not God.

What has Jesus got to do with us now anyway? If he even existed, he lived so long ago, and in a completely different place to us that he isn't slightly relevant today!

And as for coming back from the dead...come off it! Dead people don't rise again!!!

→ How do you feel when you hear statements like this?

→ Which statement strikes you the most?

## SCRIPTURE (1)

*Ask 2 people to read through the passage below. Read it once then pause then the next person reads it. Allow for some silence around the readings and listen for what strikes you about what you hear.*

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

*John 13 12-14*

## TO THINK ABOUT

- How might this help us explain who Jesus was, and why he remains so relevant in our lives today?
- Something to think about: You are talking to a friend who does not attend church, but is interested in why you go. They ask if you really truly believe that Jesus existed, he did all the healing and miracles and teaching that people talk about. What do you say?

## SCRIPTURE (2)

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, “Peace to you.” Then he focused his attention on Thomas. “Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don’t be unbelieving. Believe.” Thomas said, “My Master! My God!” Jesus said, “So, you believe because you’ve seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.”

*John 20, 26-29 (The Message).*

## ACTIVITY

It is surprising, given that stories are so powerful, that we don't often share them in our own Christian community. When was the last time you asked the person next to you in church how they came to faith? Or when did someone ask you the same question? If you think of a recent event which happened to you, perhaps a close shave in an accident or an amazing present you received, it is likely you will tell quite a few people about it and your story will become more 'polished' every time you tell it. If we can rehearse the different aspects of our faith story in a safe environment, we might find it easier to bring it to mind in conversation.

Remember the timeline from the launch session and / or the building blocks exercise you were given to take away?

Take a moment to think of any event or story from those exercises, or something else that has perhaps happened to you very recently. Get into pairs and take turns to share one aspect of your faith story with each other for one minute.

It might be about why you follow Jesus, or how your faith in the Resurrection impacts on your daily life, or an answer to prayer. After the first minute your leader will prompt you to swap roles. Next, one of your pair might like to swap with someone from a different pair (this might be achieved as a carousel - like speed dating!). Repeat the exercise and keep going for as long as there is energy or time.... who knows what you might learn?

You might like to reflect about this exercise or anything which you found difficult, enjoyable or surprising.

## THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Is Jesus the body language of God? Might he be as Pritchard writes “all that a human being could bear of God’s presence without blowing a fuse?” The Resurrection shows us that Jesus is alive with us here today – we can find him in the eyes of a child or a stranger, in an office, on the beach or even within ourselves.

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In the coming week, look for Jesus in your everyday actions and those around you. How often can we see him if we open our eyes and really look?

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## PRAYER

*Have a time of silence to offer to God what you have discussed. You may like to pray out loud or offer a word or phrase that has struck you during the session. We end the time of prayer with this:*

Almighty God,  
you sent your son Jesus to live amongst us,  
to feel and see and hear  
all that we feel and see and hear today.  
Help us grow in confidence  
in talking about our faith in you,  
and our belief in the truth and joy of your Resurrection. Help us  
to share our love for you,  
and your love for us with all those we meet  
in the coming week. Amen.

# SESSION FOUR

## WHAT ABOUT SUFFERING?

### WELCOME

### OPENING PRAYER

Almighty Father,  
We thank you for the joy of knowing you  
and for the privilege of sharing in your mission.  
Help us today to learn more about ourselves  
and each other,  
and give us the confidence, courage and sensitivity  
to share the good news of your Son Jesus  
with those around us.  
For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and for your glory. Amen.

### REVIEW

Anything that has stayed with you through the week since the last session? Remind each other of the **Weekly process and the practice of confidentiality** from Session 2. This session's subject can raise difficult issues for some.

## ACTIVITY AND STARTER – WHAT THEY SAY

Watch this film clip from YouTube: Stephen Fry on God – The Meaning of Life – RTE One (2 minutes 25 seconds)

- In pairs – What words does Stephen Fry use to describe God? What do these tell us about his image of God?
  - In pairs – What is your image of God?
  - In the group – share your ideas about what God is like
- “If God is all loving and all powerful these terrible things wouldn’t happen. But they do. So either God isn’t all loving or God isn’t all powerful. Which is it to be?”
- How do you feel when you hear statements like this?

## TO THINK ABOUT

*First a health warning – anything we say about suffering risks triggering people’s pain. We need to be ready to listen, careful about what we say and very, very humble in how we say it.*

- How we see God, will influence our thoughts about suffering.
- If we see God as in control of everything, all powerful, moving us and the world around us like pieces on a chess board, intervening when it pleases him, then everything that Stephen Fry says must be true and God can be blamed for all the horrors in the world

- But if we are brave enough to change how we see God, then other possibilities open up.
- If we see God's working in the world as from the bottom up rather than the top down, from within creation, rather than outside of creation, things can look very different. Then we have a God who limits himself to work within the system he has created.
- It's like when parents have a child. All the dreams and infinite possibilities in their minds about the child they might have cease and before them is a discrete human being, real flesh and blood. From then on all the parents can do is love and suggest and persuade and argue and bribe this new human being. They can't force it to do anything. For human existence to be worthwhile it must be free.
- In the same way, the whole of nature, not just human beings, must be free to be its dangerous self. Earthquakes are free to happen, cancers are free to grow and human beings are free to harm each other and themselves.
- So we can say God is both all loving and all powerful. Because God loves us lavishly, he restricts himself to working by loving persuasion, working flat out, all the time, for the well-being of the world and its people.
- We can choose to co-operate with this work or not.



## SCRIPTURE

*Ask 2 people to read through the passage below. Read it once then pause then the next person reads it. Allow for some silence around the readings and listen for what strikes you about what you hear.*

Then Jesus went with them to a garden called Gethsemane and told his disciples, “Stay here while I go over there and pray.” Taking along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he plunged into an agonizing sorrow. Then he said, “This sorrow is crushing my life out. Stay here and keep vigil with me.” Going a little ahead, he fell on his face, praying, “My Father, if there is any way, get me out of this. But please, not what I want. You, what do *you* want?” When he came back to his disciples, he found them sound asleep. He said to Peter, “Can’t you stick it out with me a single hour? Stay alert; be in prayer so you don’t wander into temptation without even knowing you’re in danger. There is a part of you that is eager, ready for anything in God. But there’s another part that’s as lazy as an old dog sleeping by the fire.” He then left them a second time. Again he prayed, “My Father, if there is no other way than this, drinking this cup to the dregs, I’m ready. Do it your way.” When he came back, he again found them sound asleep. They simply couldn’t keep their eyes open. This time he let them sleep on, and went back a third time to pray, going over the same ground one last time. When he came back the next time, he said, “Are you going to sleep on and make a night of it? My time is up, the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the hands of sinners. Get up! Let’s get going! My betrayer is here.”

*Matthew 26:36-46 (The Message)*

From noon to three, the whole earth was dark. Around mid-afternoon Jesus groaned out of the depths, crying loudly, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*” which means, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

*Matthew 27:46 (The Message)*

## THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

These readings show us a suffering God – one who feels overwhelmed, terrified of what he has to go through, hoping that he can avoid it and, finally, fearing that he has been abandoned by the Father.

Jesus shows us that God is in the midst of suffering with us, bearing the pain with us and working to transform it and us.

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God doesn't give answers; he enters into the questions and transforms them, in the life and terrible death of Jesus.

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## PRAYER

*Have a time of silence to offer to God what you have discussed. You may like to pray out loud or offer a word or phrase that has struck you during the session. We end the time of prayer with this:*

When suffering darkens our lives, give us light,  
When despair numbs our souls, give us hope.  
When we stumble and fall, lift us up.  
When doubts assail us, give us faith.  
When nothing seems sure, give us hope.  
May we find serenity in your presence  
and purpose in doing your will. Amen

# SESSION FIVE

## WHY GET INVOLVED?

### WELCOME

### OPENING PRAYER

Almighty Father,  
We thank you for the joy of knowing you  
and for the privilege of sharing in your mission.  
Help us today to learn more about ourselves  
and each other,  
and give us the confidence, courage and sensitivity  
to share the good news of your Son Jesus  
with those around us.  
For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ  
and for your glory. Amen.

### REVIEW

Anything that has stayed with you through the week since the last session?

## STARTER – WHAT THEY SAY

The Church doesn't talk about the things that really matter to people and worship seems out of touch and boring.

As well as being boring, the Bible's irrelevant. What's the dubious history of a migrant race in the Middle East over 2000 years ago got to do with us today? Some parts are exquisite but some parts are terrifyingly awful! The Church is obsessed with the wrong things – seems to worry too much about women priests or 'active' gay people being ordained – these are signs of seriously losing the plot.

If Christians can't agree with each other over how to interpret the Bible, how can the rest of us know how to think?

Prayer is just a religious way of talking to yourself.

It's all a bit escapist. Surely we should try and sort out our own problems.

- How do you feel when you hear statements like this?
- Which statement strikes you the most?

## SCRIPTURE

*Ask 2 people to read through the passage below. Read it once then pause then the next person reads it. Allow for some silence around the readings and listen for what strikes you about what you hear.*

Later God's angel spoke to Philip: "At noon today I want you to walk over to that desolate road that goes from Jerusalem down to Gaza." He got up and went. He met an Ethiopian eunuch coming down the road. The eunuch had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was returning to Ethiopia, where he was minister in charge of all the finances of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was riding in a chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah.

The Spirit told Philip, "Climb into the chariot." Running up alongside, Philip heard the eunuch reading Isaiah and asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

He answered, "How can I without some help?" and invited Philip into the chariot with him. The passage he was reading was this:

As a sheep led to slaughter,

and quiet as a lamb being sheared,

He was silent, saying nothing.

He was mocked and put down, never got a fair trial.

But who now can count his kin

since he's been taken from the earth?

The eunuch said, "Tell me, who is the prophet talking about: himself or some other?" Philip grabbed his chance. Using this passage as his text, he preached Jesus to him.

*Acts 8:26-35 The Ethiopian Eunuch (The Message)*

## TO THINK ABOUT

- Who do you identify with most - Philip or the Ethiopian?
- If you were on an empty bus and someone got on, sat next to you and started telling you about Jesus, how would you react?
- Grace Davie says that people come to church and stay more from a sense of Belonging than Believing – how does this compare with your own experience? Should this affect how we behave as a church?
- Think of any group (not St Mary's) that you are part of –how did you join it, what attracted you to it, why have you stayed?
- John Pritchard writes: “The Church, for better or worse, is the best we’ve got. If Christianity is to be handed on, to offer its discoveries and riches”.

## ACTIVITY

Elevator Pitch – you are in a lift at the top floor of a building and you have to tell the one other person in the lift with you everything that is important to you about the Christian faith, before it reaches the ground floor – what do you say? Take a few moments to think about this then in pairs try out your ‘pitch’ – then swap over.

## THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Have a look again at the picture you were given at the Launch session.  
Where were you then, have you moved?

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“I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly”

*John 10.10*

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## PRAYER

*We close our time together in silent prayer or praying for one another. You may like to pray out loud or offer a word or phrase that has struck you during the session. You may like to say the following to end this course:*

Look at your hands  
See the touch and the tenderness  
**God's own for the world**

Look at your feet  
See the path and direction  
**God's own for the world**

Look at your heart  
See the fire and the love  
**God's own for the world**

Look at the cross  
See God's Son our Saviour  
**God's own for the world**

This is God's world  
**We will serve God in it. Amen.**