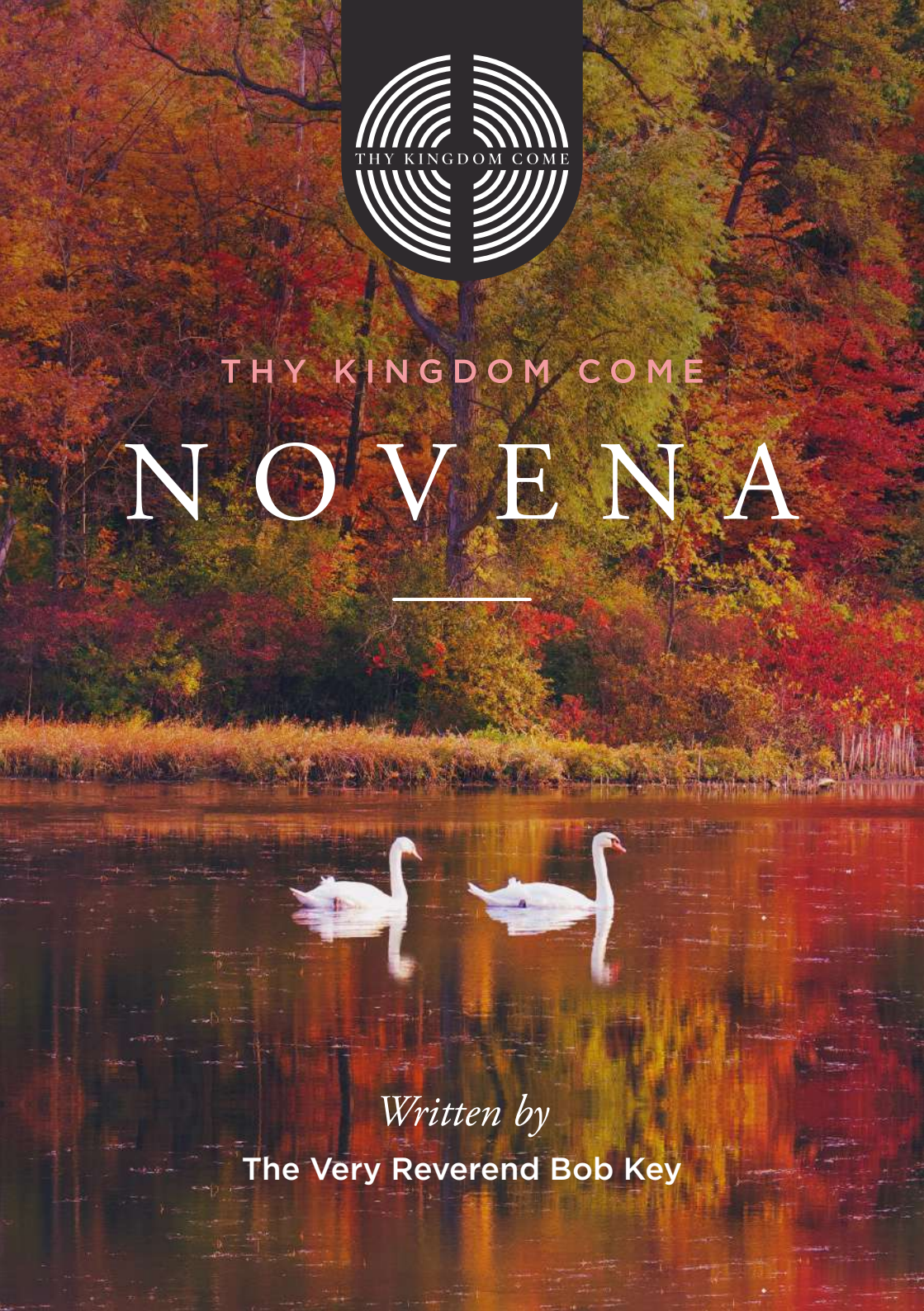

THY KINGDOM COME

NOVENA

Written by

The Very Reverend Bob Key

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Thy Kingdom Come: Novena
(Written by The Very Reverend Bob Key)
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INTRODUCTION

The worldwide wave of prayer, *Thy Kingdom Come,* is rooted in the practice and experience of the earliest church as they obeyed Jesus' command to wait for the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 1:14 tells us their mission planning was rooted in constant, ground-breaking prayer:

> *14 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*
>
> *Acts 1:14*

At this time they were surely confused, uncertain, perhaps even fearful as they considered the enormity of the task, but also excited and on the edge of a whole new world as they knew themselves to be loved and forgiven because of their Lord's death and resurrection.

The *Thy Kingdom Come* Novena for 2023 is focused on verses from St John's First Letter. They express an excitement about the character of God and all He has done. The focus is on God's dynamic action in creation and salvation. Here is a story of love, hope, challenge, and peace. Here is God's powerful invitation to share His life and love: not only here and now but for all eternity.

Thy Kingdom Come is our annual invitation and encouragement to Christians and Churches, not only in England but across the world, to seek the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we might live out and share the Kingdom of God. This passion is the heartbeat of the life of the Church. This presence is what transforms a human institution into the Body of Christ.

At the heart of *Thy Kingdom Come* is our focus to 'Pray for five'. It is an invitation to bring five people before God – friends, family, neighbours or colleagues who are not yet following the Lord Jesus. It is an encouragement to pray that the Holy Spirit will open their hearts and minds to God's love, forgiveness, and peace.

At Pentecost the Apostles received the signs of the coming of the Holy Spirit: the wind of power, the fire of holiness, and the languages of communication. At Pentecost God gives the whole world the right to look at Christians and both see and hear the Good News of Jesus. We are called to *Live the Kingdom*. So each day's thought will begin with what God does; and end with what we are called to do.

We are grateful to the Very Revd Bob Key, who leads for us in *Thy Kingdom Come* across the Anglican Communion, for writing this year's Novena and applying St John's inspiring and challenging words to twenty-first century life.

The stunning pictures are by Pastor Aaron Burden of Roseland Baptist Church, Maryland. They are a great demonstration of the diversity of God's Kingdom and the reach of His love to the whole world.

We hope you will join us as we pray, 'Come Holy Spirit.'

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby
The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell

1. .....

2. .....

3. .....

4. .....

5. .....

ASCENSION DAY

The God who reigns

Acts 1:10-11

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.
11 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven.'

Angels get some crazy lines in the Bible. Gabriel appears to the teenager Mary in her simple house in Palestine and says, 'Fear not!' The shepherds outside Bethlehem, a group not known for their religious devotion, are told there is good news of great joy for them. The Ascension story is the same. The angels (young men in white) ask the disciples: 'Why are you standing here looking into the sky?' Surely one of the Apostles must have thought: 'Why do you think we are? Jesus has just gone there and in the last six weeks our world has been turned upside-down. We have watched Him die, met Him alive again, had a wonderful time with Him of forgiveness, renewal, and teaching. Now He isn't here anymore.'

My sympathy is entirely with Peter, James, John, and the others.

The angels are quite clear. Jesus has gone and He has told the disciples what to do. They are to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then, in His power, go into the whole world, even those parts they didn't know existed. They are to proclaim the good news of God's saving love in Jesus Christ. They are to call people to repent and believe in the Saviour.

That was, is, and always will be the task the church has been given to do. That's it, in all its biblical clarity and simplicity. The Lord who ascended to heaven and reigns in glory has given us one great commission. We are to show and tell the good news of Jesus. In the book of Acts, St Luke shows us that this wonderful good news is demonstrated in every healing, every sermon, every breaking down of cultural barriers, in the provision of food for the poor in Jerusalem, in Paul taking on the philosophers in Athens, and so much more.

As we journey from Ascension to Pentecost, we follow the example of the first disciples. They prayed as they had never prayed before (Acts 1:14) and they planned for mission. Praying for our five folk who are not yet following Jesus is one way of getting involved in what God, the God who reigns, is doing. Just as those first disciples in Acts, we are to be living out the Kingdom. Everything we say and do becomes part of the proclamation. We are to be God's adverts, living icons of His love in the world.

DAY 1

The God who is

1 John 1:1-2

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

First things first! 'In the beginning God' are the first words of the Bible. 'In the beginning was the Word' starts St John's Gospel. In the opening verses of his first letter John brings the two together. Eternal Life is God's good news. It is the free gift of God: Father, Son, and, as John makes clear in this Letter, the Holy Spirit.

God is complete love. As Billy Graham, a well–known proclaimer of the Christian faith, put it: 'God didn't create mankind because He was lonely; but because He is love.' God loves us and loves relationship. Creation is pictured in Genesis as God speaking.

He speaks and things happen. Universes expand, worlds take shape. Light, darkness, colour, and texture combine in the beautiful wonder of creation. Micro-organisms too small to see, galaxies too vast to comprehend, all have their place in God's plan. Scientific theories may help us with the *how* of creation, but the Bible tells us the *who* of it. God created the world. He created us.

As the lens of Genesis focuses in on one planet and one species, we see that God makes human beings in His image to love and be loved. We are made for relationships – not only with each other but also with God.

After relationship comes responsibility. We are to be responsible for the creation that God places in our care within the context of our relationship with God. God loves us and created us for deep communion with Him.

This is why, in the picture-book of Genesis, God comes looking for Man and Woman in the garden, 'in the cool of the evening' (Genesis 3.8). After all, that is the time of day when work is over and friends gather to share and to talk.

John doesn't present God as an interesting 'add-on' to life for those who enjoy religion. God is God. The Great 'I AM' from the beginning (the title He used to introduce Himself to Moses in Exodus) to the end (Jesus applies it to Himself in John 8.58). He is the one who made us, loves us, welcomes us home in Jesus and is there whether we like it or not, believe it or not, want Him or not. He is the God who IS.

Take time today to pray for five people you know and love to know God's love for them. As you pray for them remember we are the pictures of Christ in the world; icons of His love in the way we care for creation and minister to the needs of those around us.

DAY 2

The God who loves

1 John 4:7-8

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.
Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Life can be seen as a search for love. We long to give love and to receive it. The New Testament, written originally in Greek, uses different Greek words for love. They express the variety of ways in which we find and understand what it is to love and be loved.

In these verses just one word is used. The Greek word '*agape*'. John uses it six times in just two verses. This love is special, different. This love has the heart of God as its source, the cross of Christ as its sacrificial expression, and the power of the Holy Spirit to produce in Christians that same quality of selfless love.

This is the love of God, the Holy Trinity, which calls from us a response of love which only His grace and power can produce in us. This agape love expresses the heart of the God who is love. This is the love that Jesus demonstrated as being greater than any other love. That selfless love touches the lepers, embraces the outcast, welcomes those whom polite society condemned, and opens His arms on the cross to encircle the world.

John is not content merely to soak up that love from God. He does want his readers to rest in that love, and to find in it the assurance of sins forgiven and the powerful liberty of the Holy Spirit to set them free from slavery to selfishness and sin; but He looks for more. As Christians, we are to be channels of that love which comes from God and which so demonstrates His nature that John says 'God is love.'

It is a tragedy when any congregation fails to demonstrate that divine love in its relationship with the Lord, with fellow Christians, or with the world Christ came to save. St Paul wrote, 'The greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13), and in Revelation Jesus writes to the Church at Ephesus, 'You have lost your first love' (Revelation 2). Let's take a look in the spiritual mirror of God's word and ask Him to make our love complete.

As we pray for our five folk today, let us remember their need of love. Let's bring their emotional and physical needs to God and pray that they may open up to His eternal love, His healing, life and light. Living the Kingdom today is obedience to a straightforward command from the Apostle: 'Friends, let us love one another.' It was the mark of the life of the early church that convinced others of the truth of the good news.

DAY 3

The God who shares

1 John 4:9

9 This is how God showed His love among us:
He sent His one and only son into the world that
we might live through Him.

'You don't know what it's like!' is a cry of despair, frustration and pain. When we feel misunderstood, when it seems that friends simply don't 'get' the pressure we're under, when we feel unjustly judged or criticised we want to yell: 'Try walking in my shoes. Try living my life.'

As we think of God, who He is, especially His greatness, majesty, glory ... all those great biblical words that emphasise the 'Wow!' factor of the creator of all things, it is easy to slip into thinking: 'So what can He possibly understand of my life in 2023?' Isn't God a spectator, an observer, all-knowing perhaps, but far away and uninvolved?

In this letter, St John underlines the greatness and glory of the great creator. He stresses His triumphant relational love which drives the whole story of salvation. Now it gets even better. In today's verse we are assured that this Lord is no distant disinterested onlooker but one who understands what it is like to live our life, because He Himself came in the Lord Jesus Christ. This coming into the world is the guarantee that God understands us through and through because He has shared our life and walked in our shoes.

The one without whom, as St John's Gospel puts it, 'nothing was made that has been made' (John 1.3), was content not only to be a carpenter in Nazareth and a member of a downtrodden race in an occupied country, but also a microscopic foetus in Mary's womb.

As we pray for our five today, we pray that they may catch a glimpse of what theologians call the transcendence and immanence of God, His glory, and His closeness. Pray that they may find Him a friend who understands them, and a Lord who loves them.

This verse is a wonderful reminder that love is not just a feeling, but a decision of the will. It shows itself in positive action as we Live the Kingdom. We love the hungry with food, the lonely with companionship. We love those who don't yet know Christ by living and speaking for Jesus with humility and integrity.

DAY 4

The God who saves

1 John 4:9-11

9 This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Imagine you can't swim. For some of us that may not be very difficult. Imagine you are in deep water, you can't touch the bottom, you are exhausted, scared and beginning to panic. What do you need? Imagine somebody offers to read out the introductory lessons from 'Teach yourself to swim'. Another friend offers to swim near you so that all you have to do is copy how they do it. Neither would be much help. You don't need a book of instructions and ideals you can't follow, and seeing someone else apparently doing it perfectly will not be any use either.

What you need is a lifeguard. You don't need educating, you don't need inspiring, you need rescuing.

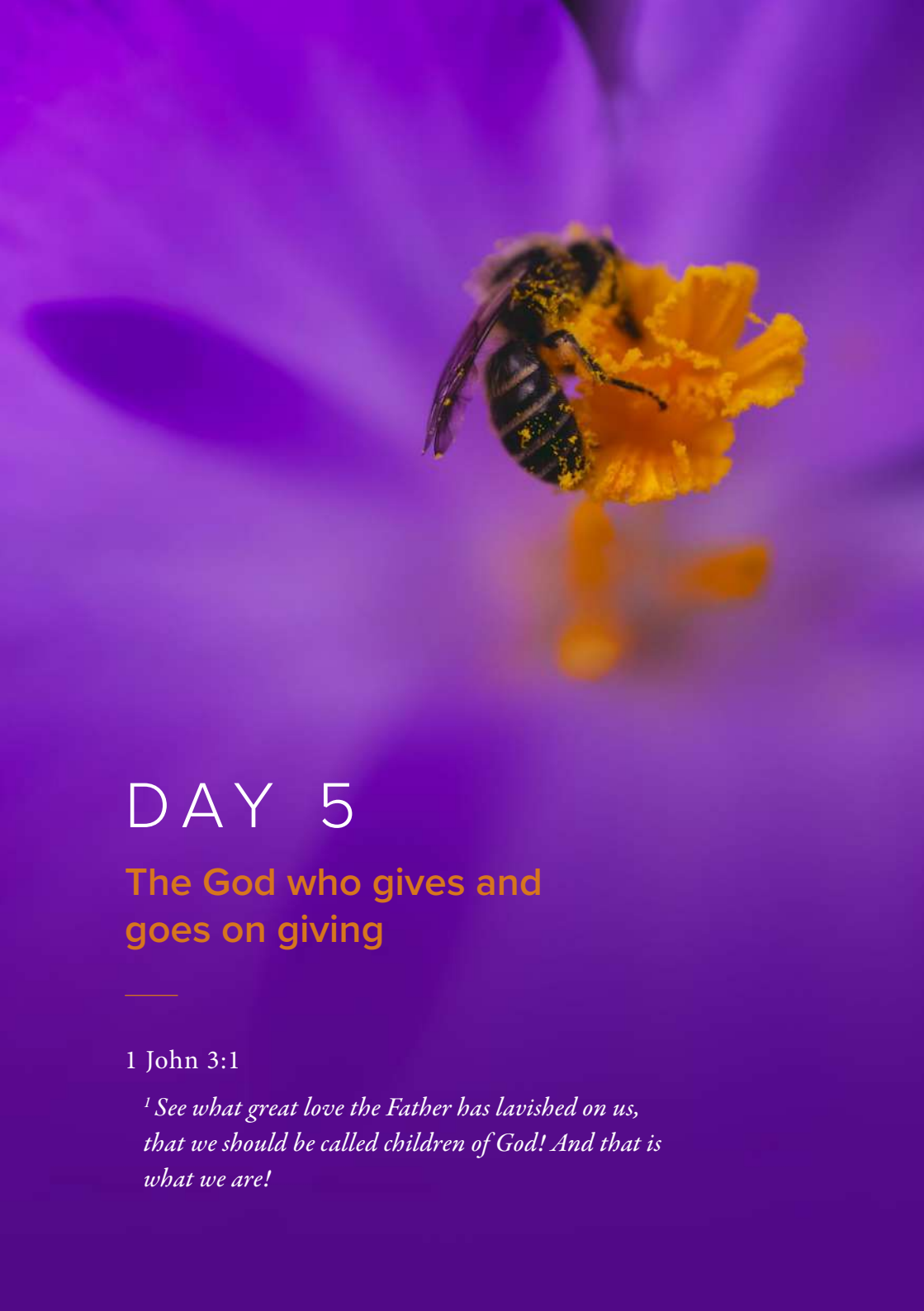
St John is quite clear that this is the whole point. This is why God's Son came into the world. The *motive* was love, the *purpose* was eternal life, and the *means* was the cross. For two thousand years Christians have found different ways to express what the Lord Jesus' death on the cross means. Like facets of a diamond, the various ways of looking at God's actions in making us right with Himself reflect a different colour of the spectrum of God's love. In these verses, John uses language that would have been very familiar to his audience: the sacrifice. All the background of the Old Testament comes into focus. There, people offered sacrifices of animals to God in order to find forgiveness. They show that the sacrifice died so the worshipper lived.

The cross works, not because we can ever fully understand it or perfectly explain it, but because our holy and loving God says it does. The person in the sea doesn't need to know the physics of swimming or where the lifeguard learned to swim, he just needs to trust himself to the rescuer. As St John puts it in his gospel, we need to believe *into* Jesus. We give up self-reliance or trying to be good enough for God and allow ourselves to be rescued.

The thief who turned to Jesus as he hung dying on a cross next to the cross of Jesus and simply said: 'Lord, remember me', didn't know much theology but he knew his need. In response, Jesus promised him paradise.

Pray that your five will allow Christ to rescue them and find that peace that comes from knowing you're safe in someone else's arms.

As we Live out the Kingdom, there can be nothing of imagining we are better than anyone else. Instead, our lives and our words are, as the great theologian Paul Tillich put it, 'One beggar telling another beggar where to find food.'



DAY 5

The God who gives and goes on giving

1 John 3:1

1 See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

St John has a 'WOW!' moment in today's verse. It is encouraging that even the apostles sometimes struggle for words to express just how great God is. His love, His compassion, His glory, His understanding, His coming to us in the Lord Jesus Christ leave John almost lost for words. He finally settles on a way to sum up God's giving in creation and His giving of Himself. The expression he uses means something like, 'love from another world'.

Our human understanding can't get our brains round it, but the wonderful thing is that we can know it, receive it, rest in it, enjoy it, and share it. Genesis tells us that mankind was made in God's image. John is now telling us that we have, if we have believed in Christ, been born again as God's children; and that truth simply blows his mind.

My own father died when I was five, so I have few memories of him. In photos, we look quite alike; but if I am ever tempted to doubt whose child I am I have only to open the filing cabinet and read my birth certificate. Today's verse with its great, 'And that is what we are!' is the Christian's birth certificate. Our assurance is based not in our own feelings, but in the effective word of God. No wonder the modern translation uses 'lavish' to describe the generous, costly, self-giving love of God.

Pray today that the five you are holding in your heart will receive and rest in the love of the Father, which constantly calls them home to become His children. Pray that they will find in Him the peace and place in His family for which we were created and redeemed.

Living the kingdom, living as sons and daughters of the king, means sharing that generosity. At the feeding of the 5,000 there were 12 baskets full of the leftovers. Jesus tells His disciples as He looks at the hungry crowds, 'You give them something to eat.' He still does. As we live out the generous overflowing love of the kingdom then the hungry will be fed, the lonely befriended, prisoners visited, and the poor understand the good news.

DAY 6

The God who understands

1 John 4:11-12

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.

The disciples were not a naturally cohesive group of people. Left to themselves they were unlikely to have chosen to set up business together or even share a holiday. Matthew was a tax collector working for the occupying Roman authorities. Simon the Zealot belonged to a group that opposed paying taxes to Caesar, some of whose members had been involved in a revolt.

James and John, partners in a family fishing business on Lake Galilee, were known as 'sons of thunder', probably because of their fiery tempers and desire for power. This same John who refers to himself as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in the Gospel that bears his name becomes the 'apostle of love' in this Letter. His life has been utterly transformed, his character turned inside out by his relationship with the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We see divisions all around us: gender, race, language, education, upbringing, nationality. Things that in themselves could contribute to the diversity of God's creation become grounds for misunderstanding, strife, enmity, and even violence.

Our Heavenly Father, like a master artist, has a palette of rich and varied colours which are designed to paint a beautiful picture of His creation but which, in our sinfulness and selfishness, pride and fear, we fashion into an unholy mess. In this mess, so often, the poor pay the greatest price of our inability to be God's reliable gardeners in His world.

John calls us, in today's verse, to be defined by the love of God: not by anything else. St Paul puts it very plainly in Galatians 3:28:

> *'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'*

Pray that your five may find their identity in who they are in Christ.

Living the kingdom must mean building churches and communities where 'Love one another' doesn't mean merely liking people who are like us. We are called to something much more radical, much more attractive. We are designed to be a community of servants: serving and being served by each other across all the man-made barriers that so often divide and discriminate.

DAY 7

The God who forgives

1 John 1:8-9

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Psychologists, authors, celebrities, and saints all encounter guilt and deal with it in different ways. Some people see guilt as something we learned in childhood. Others think it is a positive thing that stops mankind from doing worse things than we actually do. Yet others think of it as a negative emotion that stops us realising our full potential, even if our success is at the cost of derailing the lives of those around us.

St John is wonderfully simple, straightforward, realistic, and practical. He invites us to look in the mirror and admit the truth. We're not perfect, none of us is; and if we think 'sinner' is just a term that applies to other people, then we are simply wrong!

Even in prisons there is often a grading of offenders so that non-violent criminals see themselves as better than violent ones. Violent criminals can think, 'Well, at least I didn't kill anyone.'

Inside or outside prison, it is so easy to make ourselves feel better by finding someone else on whom we can look down.

For St John there is a great sense of release in a correct diagnosis. Reading today's verses is like going to the doctor and being told that there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that there is something seriously wrong. The good news is that there is a never-failing cure.

St Augustine said, 'Repentant tears wash out the stain of guilt.' We claim the peace, forgiveness and atonement of the Cross *and* the restoration and resurrection of Easter morning when we confess our sins and believe into Christ. That's what we are praying for as we think of our five people today. Pray that the Holy Spirit will open their eyes not to negative guilt that leads to despair but to the hope and joy of forgiveness in Jesus.

Living the Kingdom, as those who know themselves as freely loved and forgiven by God, leaves no room for feelings of imagined superiority like those in the prison. There is nobody for whom Christ had to die more than He had to die for me. So, in the power of the Holy Spirit:

- humility replaces pride,
- responsibilities replace rights and
- service takes the place of selfishness.

DAY 8

The God who challenges

1 John 2:6

6 Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.

God, our loving Father, not only wants the best *for* us, He wants to enable the best *in* us. He longs that, in the life and power of the Holy Spirit, we live the most productive, most effective Christian lives we can.

Today's verse from 1 John seems blunt and hard-hitting, but that doesn't mean it's negative. A football manager roaring encouragement to his team as they battle difficult opponents is trying to spur them on to success. That's what is going on here. St John knows that as the Christians in the churches try to live for Jesus in a very difficult world, he needs to encourage them to remember whose team they are in. It is still true, in the twenty-first century world, that Christian faith does not set the moral guidelines in public life, business ethics, or the way in which governments operate. We need the same encouragement.

We are playing in Christ's colours and the standards by which we live must be His and not those of the prevailing culture. St John's words are powerfully relevant in our world where there are many forces seeking to air-brush Christian faith out of the public arena and to ridicule Christian moral standards as out of touch with modern thinking.

What St John calls for is straightforward Christian integrity. There is to be no place for saying one thing and doing another. Hypocrisy is a real problem for Christian evangelism. As we seek to share our faith with those who know us, it will not help if they know that Jesus' pattern of care for others is not one we follow.

The word John uses means not just 'walk', but 'walk about'. It could be used of the clothes you choose to put on in which to 'walk about'. Paul uses the same word when he encourages us to 'walk in the Spirit' in Galatians 5.16. From John and Paul, the daily challenge is to walk about in the character of Christ produced not in our own strength but by the Pentecost power of the Holy Spirit.

As we pray for our five folk today, pray that the lives of the Christians they meet will be Christlike and attractive in the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit.

Living the Kingdom means that we can't be cardboard cut-outs: looking superficially Christian but with little inner depth and reality. God has given the world the right to look at us and see the character of Christ.

DAY 9

The God who empowers

1 John 4:13

13 This is how we know that we live in Him and He in us: He has given us of His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.

I think of it as the Niagara effect. If you have ever been to a great waterfall like Niagara on the Canadian-American border, or the Victoria Falls on the Zambezi river, or even if you have just seen pictures, you can imagine the limitless flow of water. The quantity, the power, the glorious array of colours of the light on the water combine to give an awe-inspiring picture of the beauty of God's creation.

Now join me in taking that picture one stage further. Imagine you have a cup or a glass at the bottom of the falls. It would enjoy a never-ending supply of thirst-quenching power-giving water. That's the Niagara effect and that's a picture of the Pentecost power of the Holy Spirit.

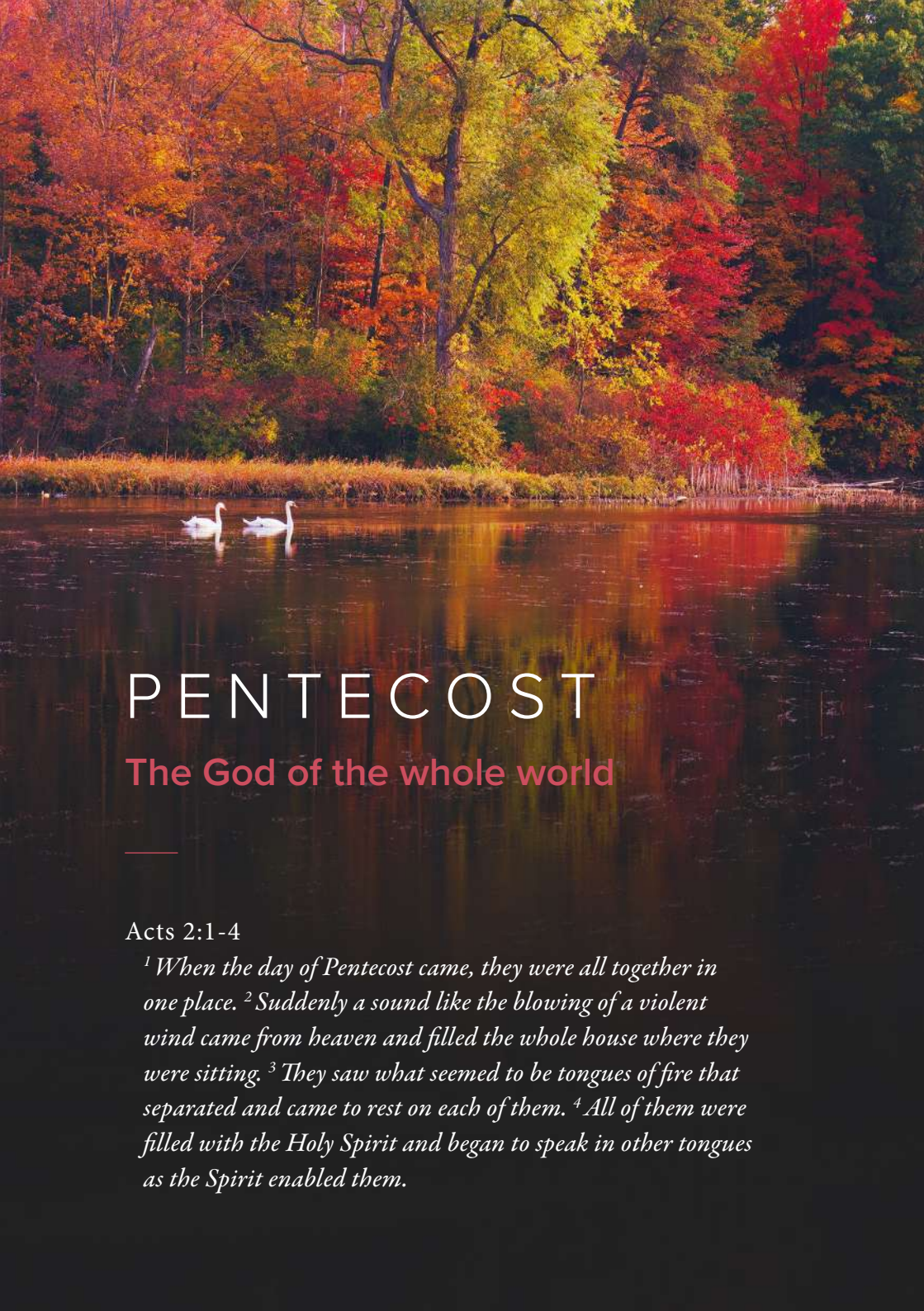
Pentecost, which we celebrate tomorrow, is the day when what Jesus calls 'the gift my Father promised' (Acts 14) arrives. The Holy Spirit blows the early Christians out of their comfort zone and into the world to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. They were filled with the fullness of the Holy Spirit, who came with great signs full of significance and power.

Luke tells us being filled with the Spirit was something that happened several times over as new opportunities for the Gospel opened up or new situations arose. The phrase St Paul uses to talk about that filling of the Spirit translates literally as 'be being filled' (Ephesians 5:18). This is a Greek present tense suggesting a continuous action. We are to go on and on being filled with the Spirit. It's the Niagara effect. As the glasses of our lives are held under the limitless, dynamic, powerful provision of God the Holy Spirit, then there is enough to meet our every spiritual need. Perhaps even more importantly, there is overflow to show Christ's love, grace, power and salvation to those around us.

That's how St John structures today's verses. The Spirit comes to the believer and the outcome is that we see and share that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Christ in us and the Gospel in the world. That's what tomorrow's feast of Pentecost is all about.

We pray that the Holy Spirit of God will open and fill the lives of our five folk today.

We can't 'Live the Kingdom' in our own strength. But, with the Niagara effect of the Holy Spirit, anything is possible.



PENTECOST

The God of the whole world

Acts 2:1-4

[1] When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [2] Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [3] They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

The wait was over. Pentecost had arrived but whatever they had expected this wasn't it. Pentecost was originally a Harvest Festival. You can read about it in Exodus 23.

The Pentecost story is all about signs, and God uses the sign of the Harvest Festival to point to a new harvest: not of crops but of people. It is a theme that Jesus employed in the Gospels when He loved to use farming imagery. He so often used pictures people would understand to teach the truth of God's love and the urgent need of a response of faith to the good news He was bringing.

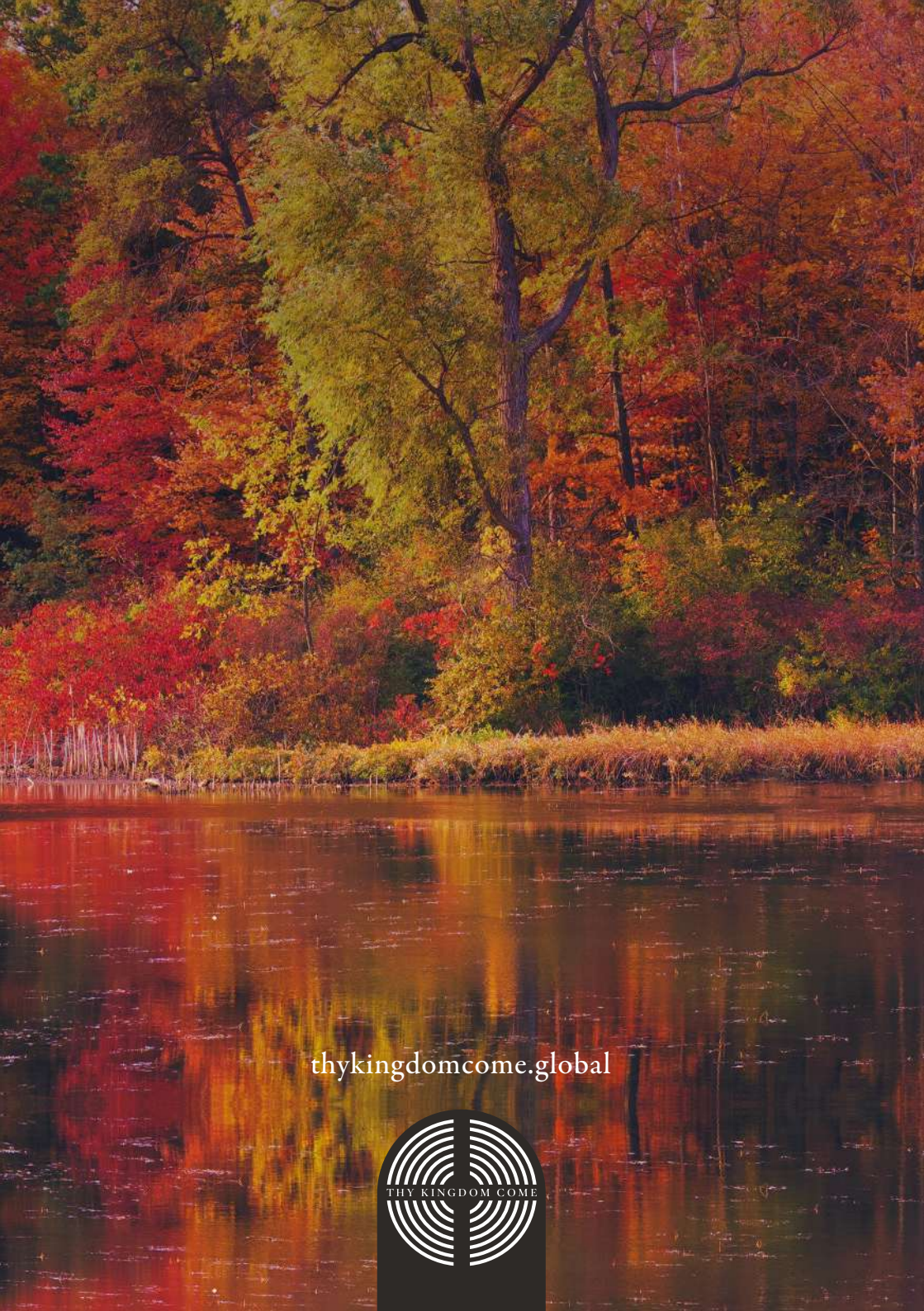
There are three signs for Pentecost: wind, fire, and languages.

The *wind* blew the infant church out of its comfort zone and into the streets of Jerusalem. The picture of the dove as a sign of the Holy Spirit is only ever used of Jesus at His baptism. The sign of guiding the holy, obedient Son of God is a gentle dove of peace. The sign for moving the church, which is so often comfortable in committee rooms discussing things that don't matter, is a powerful wind.

The *fire* speaks of holiness. It's a sign of God's holiness that goes all the way back to Moses and the burning bush. Fire to burn away past failures, resentments, sins, and fears. Living the Kingdom means a longing for the Spirit of God to make us more like Jesus, to enable us to the be the people we just can't be in our own strength.

Languages. Most people in Jerusalem that day would have known enough Greek to get by, but it wasn't their mother tongue … and that's what the languages or 'tongues' of Pentecost are all about. God gave the whole world the right to hear the Gospel without having to learn another language or a whole load of theological shorthand. So often our language is aimed at insiders, those who are already members of the club. Jesus didn't do that and Pentecost sends us to do the same.

Continue to pray that the precious people we have been carrying to Jesus in our prayers these last 11 days may respond to His great love and receive His new life. Pray that we may Live the Kingdom clearly and simply 'So the world may believe.' John 17:21.



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