

'A great gift to the church' – Justin Welby

THE



EVERYDAY



GOD

ENCOUNTERING THE DIVINE  
IN THE WORKS OF MERCY

JONATHAN ARNOLD

Foreword by Rose Hudson-Wilkin, Bishop of Dover

# PRAISE FOR THE EVERYDAY GOD



‘Jonathan has written the book which sums up the work he leads in Canterbury Diocese. It is deeply based in the Bible, centred on people made in the image of God and founded on the love and authority of Jesus Christ. It is accessible to read and challenging to think about, vivid about people and rubs at our rough edges of selfishness, visionary in application and practical in use. It is a great gift to the church that brings together talking and showing the gospel.’

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

‘Jonathan’s theologically rich yet accessible consideration of the practice of doing justice through the rhythms, tunes and modes of music opens up a fresh vista. This fired my imagination. I heard beautiful and intriguing things. Here is the sort of “new song” that we need to hear in an ever-needy world.’

Very Revd Dr David Monteith, dean of Canterbury

‘*The Everyday God* is a must read, in which Jonathan Arnold offers the challenge that the church, and every Christian, needs to be reminded of over and over again: that the kingdom of God, seen in the person of Jesus Christ, is one of justice and mercy, which is care for all people and all creation. This is an inspiring and useful book for individuals of all ages, for small groups, or whole congregations, in which you cannot help but be moved in heart, mind and to action as Dr Arnold encourages us that “at our best, as human beings, we begin to join the symphony and the dance of the divine Trinity of God.”’

Very Revd Jo Kelly-Moore, dean of St Albans

'The cry for justice is a common and oft-repeated theme in the scriptures. Jonathan Arnold, priest, singer and director of the Social Justice Network, has a unique view of the interwoven themes that are given voice in this book. In theological and musical reflection on action that is grounded in the reality of the world and human need, our understanding of God's love for the world is deepened. We still need both to sing the songs of God's justice and to hear the cry of those who seek it.'

Venerable Dr Will Adam, archdeacon of Canterbury

'*The Everyday God* is a ringing affirmation of faith in God's justice and mercy and how it transforms our everyday attitudes and actions.'

Canon Angela Tilby, canon emerita of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, writer and broadcaster

**THE**  
**EVERYDAY**  
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ENCOUNTERING THE DIVINE  
IN THE WORKS OF MERCY

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*For Emma, with love*

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# OVERTURE

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If you read the Bible, if you look at it at all, constantly [God] was showing up in people's lives at the worst possible time of their life.

Mike Yaconelli

**'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'**

MATTHEW 25:35-36, 40 (ESV)

Everything that follows is based upon a belief that God is active in our everyday lives. This belief is in turn based upon two premises: first, the evidence of the life, teaching, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as presented in the Bible; and second, personal experience of a lived reality with God in the everyday through knowledge of Christ and grace of the Holy Spirit. You may or may not share this belief, or even be curious about it. But the fact that you are reading this suggests you might be. You may think that there is enough evil and suffering in the world to demonstrate that God is nowhere to be seen or heard in our pain. But this book argues that it is precisely here where God is to be found: in our pain, our loss, our suffering; also in our joy, hope, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, drudgery or contentment, in the everyday. More specifically, the evidence of Christ's humble and sacrificial life of service, teaching and healing suggests that he most especially identifies with the poor, the oppressed and the suffering.

If what I believe is true – that the ‘Christ event’ of 2,000 years ago was the self-emptying and self-disclosure of God by entering the depths of our humanity to bring salvation and life – then we cannot ignore it, because with that belief comes a response to a call. The call comes *from* love and is a call *to* love. This book is an exploration of how we can hear, and tune into, the sweet music of that call, and how we might join in with Christ’s music of mercy, justice and love.

To love God with all our being, to love ourselves and to love our neighbour is a lifelong endeavour and adventure. To explore how we can connect with, participate in and be ‘in tune’ with the divine action of God in the world, I am going to draw some help from the vocabulary of music. Concepts and images from the musical world will form a metaphorical backdrop to our theological reflection. For, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote: ‘Christ plays in ten thousand places, in lovely limbs and eyes not his.’

## The music of mercy and justice – Christ plays in ten thousand places

*Í say móre: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –  
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.*  
Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘As kingfishers catch fire’

These words speak of the acceptance of God’s grace, and how grace can transform our everyday behaviour and actions, allowing a person to be ‘in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is’ – that is, a bearer of Christ. Christ plays in ten thousand places, in our limbs, our eyes, and God can be perceived in the faces of others. Manley Hopkins knew that Christ is everywhere. Christ is the unbegotten foundation of creation, for ‘without him nothing was made that was made’ (John 1:3,

NKJV), and Christ is incarnated everywhere, in human bodies, minds and expressions and in creation. Christ as God and fully human is therefore everywhere and in the everyday, not remote or invisible. As a consequence, not only can we see Christ at work in the world every day through his actions of justice, kindness and mercy, but we can also perceive him in the 'lovely in limbs and eyes not his'.

The theological paradox that is at play here has its basis in Matthew 25, where Christ, at one and the same time, calls us to be involved in his works of mercy, but also equips us through his grace so that God may work in and through us to make his actions possible. It is both a command and a gift, creating moments when God is manifest 'in ten thousand places', in everyday people, places and things; when we see, feel and know Christ in the personal, the individual, in the natural world, in the now, whether through transformation, peace, comfort or his energising power.

In his interpretation of Manley Hopkins' poem, Craig Gardiner extends the visual element to the aural, or sonic, by using the musical metaphor of 'polyphony', which literally means 'many voices or sounds'. Polyphony is a term used to describe music with interweaving tunes or melodies that are different yet complementary, overlapping and yet harmonious. In many ways community can be described in terms of polyphony: 'The many melodies of this Christ are revealed in the faces and lives of numerous people... whose very being is an act of worship to the Father',<sup>1</sup> just as Manley Hopkins's poem weaves themes of humanity and divinity together, connected by the melodious interaction of justice, grace, limbs, eyes and faces, Father and Son. In this sense, the phrase 'in God's eye what in God's eye he is' could be 'transposed from a visual to an aural metaphor: to be in God's ear the melody that God already hears for us. The purpose of humanity is to play out these melodies that God hears in the reality of the world'.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Manley Hopkins' ideas reflect those of Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah, where actions of justice and kindness, rather than malice and spite, are perceived as the true way in which all are called to reflect the divine image.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

ISAIAH 58:9-10

It is for this reason that the structure of this book is based around the seven works of mercy, those practical and down-to-earth acts that can reflect God's grace in the world.

## The everyday God

To talk about an everyday God is to recognise that to live fully as a Christian is to see and hear where God is acting, whether inside or outside our churches, and to join in with that work. The music of our mission as Christians is to join in with the melody of the *missio Dei*, God's mission.

I am fortunate to work with a team of skilled and passionate people who manage projects aligned with the seven works of mercy. The Social Justice Network team is an outward-facing framework of the diocese that works to express our faith in God through work in high-profile topical issue areas, such as prisons, homelessness, deprivation and forced migration. We build relationships with partner networks to discern and develop new audiences for future engagement.

**Every day there  
are stories of  
healing and hope.**

Every day there are stories of healing and hope. This book has emerged as a testament to these initiatives and in response to the many social and community projects within our parishes, villages and towns.

Drawing upon this experience in community, I hope to explore how the biblical imperative to love one's neighbour through

practical and applied faith is evident in the works of mercy found in Matthew 25:35–40 and in people today, and how these works of mercy are a means of grace, through which God gives blessing, forgiveness, life and salvation.

Through these true stories of everyday lives lived courageously and generously in the service of one another, *The Everyday God* shares observations of lives transformed through the dedication of ordinary people seeking to follow Christ, and thereby reflects upon Jesus' call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked (shelter the homeless), give drink to the thirsty, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, welcome the stranger and bury the dead. Pope Francis added an extra spiritual work of mercy in 2016, to care for our environment, which will also be explored in this work.

By using the term 'everyday God', I am not referring to the idea that 'God is not just for Sunday', '24/7 discipleship' or 'fresh expressions' of being church, nor am I centred on who we are and what we do as Christians, but rather on *who* God is, *where* God is and *what* God is doing there. It is God's music, Christ's melody that is playing, and if we tune in and listen, we might be able to hear it, be moved by it, sing along with it. We might even find ourselves in harmony with it and with one another.

If there is an 'everyday God', then I guess there must also be an 'everyday theology', which you and I are now engaged in. So, what is it? Kevin Vanhoozer describes everyday theology as 'faith seeking understanding of everyday life. Nothing should be easier to understand than the notion of "the everyday" for the simple reason that it is so commonplace.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore a curiosity, a seeking, a questioning born out of our faith. And hence we don't need any special place or institution to be an everyday theologian. Our research laboratory is the everyday and the ordinary, whatever and wherever that might be for you, because God's grace is in the everyday.

God is revealed through the ordinary, because God is at the very heart of every human experience. Through the creation of the world, through

the Logos (Christ), to the incarnation of Jesus, God has demonstrated that he dwells with us, as Paul Tillich put it, ‘as the ground of our being.’<sup>4</sup> This divine gift of grace at the depths of our human existence is Christ’s identification with ‘the least’ (Matthew 25:40).

We do not, therefore, treat our neighbour as a means to an end, a means to receiving or invoking divine grace. Rather, we see that the everyday encounter is made holy. It follows that we love and serve our neighbour for their own sake, as they do for us, and in so doing forget our own selfish concerns. Only then can the encounter be grace-filled. The challenge that God’s work in the world sets for us is how to tune into God’s love, service, mercy and justice. How do we connect with the work of God? How do we join in with the music of God and play his theme of mercy.

## The works of mercy

The works of mercy mentioned by Christ in Matthew 25 are known as ‘corporal’, because they pertain to the body, or *corpus*, and are about our physical needs. The six works of mercy named by Jesus are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to visit the prisoner and to visit the sick. The seventh work of mercy, to bury the dead, is not mentioned in Matthew 25 but comes from the book of Tobit and was added to the list later in Christian history. The importance of performing these duties was urged on Christians from the earliest days of the church, in fact from Christ’s declaration of the two highest commandments:

He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

MATTHEW 22:37–40

Fulfilling the works of mercy therefore goes hand in hand with loving God and our neighbour. As St John of the Cross wrote: 'At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.' For Aquinas, the virtue of practising mercy was part of the greater command and virtue of love, and for him it was this virtue which was the essence of the divine.<sup>5</sup>

In Catholic theology, the seven works of corporal mercy were complemented by the seven spiritual works of mercy, whose purpose was to relieve spiritual suffering. These are: to instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to comfort the afflicted; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offences willingly; and to pray for the living and the dead.

Of course, this passage from Matthew's gospel has caused theological debate throughout history, insisting as it does that according to our merciful deeds, or lack of them, we shall be judged and sentenced to everlasting heaven or hell. In Catholic theology, this seeming endorsement of justification by works stands against the view that God's grace is offered to us freely in the sacraments. In Protestant theology, Jesus' words seem to contrast with the Lutheran imperative that we are justified to God by faith alone.

Such debates will no doubt remain as we struggle to understand the nature of creation and our place within it, but what can unify theological or religious difference is the fundamental sense that all of us are made by a merciful God and in God's image, and our purpose is to worship and love that creator and to exercise love towards each other as we are best able to do. This involves treating others, especially those with whom we strongly disagree or whom we dislike, as holy, uniquely loved children of God. We are commanded to treat the stranger as if they were Christ by offering what we can to help or comfort and in this way to join in with God's grace, which is at work in this world, singing the song of mercy and justice.

It is important to note at this stage that the efficacy of the works of mercy is grounded on God's mercy and not our own. St Bernard of

Clairvaux asked: 'What can I count on? My own merits? No. My merit is God's mercy... If the mercies of the Lord are manifold, I too will abound in merits.'<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, these works of mercy are not just about satisfying people's material needs – of food, drink, shelter and so on. It is not just about the alleviation of material poverty. It is much deeper than that; it is also about prayer, sacrifice and love, as Mother Teresa said:

If we pick up a man hungry for bread, we give him bread and we have satisfied his hunger. But if we meet a man who is terribly lonely, rejected, discarded by society... material assistance will not help him. For to eliminate that loneliness, to eliminate that terrible pain, he needs prayer, he needs sacrifice, he needs tenderness and love.<sup>2</sup>

For it is by loving the other that one becomes a true disciple of Jesus and that the face of the Father is revealed. God's commandment to love one's neighbour is a single and coherent rule of life. It is for this reason that a Year of Mercy in the Roman Catholic Church was declared in 2016, to promote compassion and combat disrespect and discrimination.

## Notes

- 1) Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', 61:3–5, quoted in 'Bernard of Clairvaux: My merit comes from his mercy', [enlargingtheheart.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/bernard-of-clairvaux-my-merit-comes-from-his-mercy](http://enlargingtheheart.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/bernard-of-clairvaux-my-merit-comes-from-his-mercy)
- 2) Quoted in Brian Kolodiejchuk, 'Mercy and Mother Teresa', Omnes, 4 April 2016, [omnesmag.com/en/newsroom/la-misericordia-and-mother-teresa](http://omnesmag.com/en/newsroom/la-misericordia-and-mother-teresa)





# 5

## RELATIONSHIP, RESONANCE AND REFRESHMENT: GIVING DRINK TO THE THIRSTY

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**‘I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.’**

MATTHEW 25:35

[Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will

**give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'**

JOHN 4:5-15

**How precious is your steadfast love, O God!**

**All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.  
They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light we see light.**

PSALM 36:7-9

In the story about Christ and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, there is refreshment, relationship and resonance. The refreshment is not only provided by the water of the well, for Jesus is thirsty for some water, but the woman has a thirst for something she cannot yet name, the living water springing up to eternal life, which is to be found in the person and salvation of Christ himself. There is relationship, as their banter soon turns to a serious invitation to drink from divine springs of life. And there is resonance as, in the verses that follow the passage quoted above, the woman understands Christ's insights about her own life and circumstances and proclaims these to her community, inviting them to come and see the Messiah who 'told me everything that I have ever done!' (John 4:29). The result of her evangelism is the conversion of many of her neighbourhood to believe in Christ. The meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan creates a resonance that is felt far and wide, first in Samaria and then to the whole world through the word of God, as related by John.

The meeting of Christ with this woman is like a musical duet, with theme and counter melody weaving together in their exchanges. In music we also find relationships and resonance. It is the relationship between the notes and the silence between the notes and chords that turn mere sound into music, as pitches, melodies and harmonies relate to one

another. Then there are the human relationships involved in music, between composer and the music composed, between the creator and the created; between the composer, who imagines the music, and the performer, who enables the music to come to life; and between the composer, performer and recipient, the audience or listener. For music to work it must be resonant. We hear the resonance of a single instrument or voice as the sound waves ripple outwards into space and time. We hear the human resonance between singers and players, an understanding between violinist and cellist, between soprano and baritone, who embody the sounds and bring the music, as intended by the creative composer, into being. There is reciprocity, a mutual give and take with each musician within a group, and empathy too in the making and receiving of music. If there is not, then music cannot happen. If we cannot listen to one another, we cannot hear how to respond – how to adapt our own voice, in dynamics, pitch, tone, volume, colour or strength.

So the metaphor of music and the biblical narrative of Jacob's well become useful ways of exploring our second work of mercy – giving drink to the thirsty: both those who are physically thirsty, but also those who are thirsty for company, friendship, respect, dignity, help, comfort, purpose, meaning and ultimately refuge, redemption and peace. We're now going to hear Patrick's story and how he and his wife Debbie responded to the needs of the thirsty in their community and thereby created beautiful relationships and a refuge, the results of which have resonated far beyond their locality, helping many people to find their own voice.

## PATRICK'S STORY

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Cliftonville in Margate is one of the poorest parishes in the country. Many people are either drug- or alcohol-dependent; they may be ex-offenders, have mental health issues or be street homeless or sofa surfers. A significant number of people are also vulnerable in

lots of other ways. They may have learning difficulties; they may be recent care leavers. Cliftonville is a hard place to live. During our time at St Paul's Church, where Debbie and I ministered, our hearts were often broken by the encounters and the experiences we had with the people of this parish, because the reality is that sharing life with people doesn't usually fit into tidy boxes. It's messier than that. It's even more dangerous than that sometimes.

Having our hearts broken wasn't a bad thing. Our tendency is to shy away from that kind of pain. We don't naturally want to have our hearts broken, but it grew compassion in us. For example, I knew a guy who, years ago, lived in a tiny flat for 17 years. And for most of that time, he had lived without any running water. The taps and pipes were there, but they didn't work. Why? Because he was too scared to complain to the landlord, who had a reputation for answering complaints with a baseball bat. Eventually, with our help, the tenant managed to get into other accommodation. Sadly, he committed suicide in the isolation and loneliness of the Covid lockdown. Even now, I personally know of at least two other people who do not have running water in modern accommodation.

**Having our hearts broken wasn't a bad thing. Our tendency is to shy away from that kind of pain... but it grew compassion in us.**

Other people, who are rough sleepers, perhaps dossing down on a bench or if they're lucky, in a tent, would come and get water from the church's outdoor tap just to be able to wash themselves or to get a drink. These are third-world problems in a first-world country. There is something within us that wants to help the

person in the gutter. Regardless of our own character, because we are not saints, you can't work in this environment for long and not want to help the stranger or the person who has no running water or electricity or food or school uniform for their child. Even

if all you can offer is a listening ear for five minutes or to say, 'You are loved and welcome.' Or it might mean working with someone for years and years, taking one step forward and one step back.

## Relationship

We think that church should be about belonging first, before belief and behaviour. So everyone is invited to feel that they belong. But we have encountered a lot of behaviour over the years that most people would not consider normal in church, such as violence and substance abuse. In terms of how to deal with that, we wrote the book as we went along. In the first year or two we found it hard. Verbal violence, abuse, fights in the church, drug-taking, prostitutes outside the church. We took the view, and still do, that no one will ever fall so far from God that they can't be redeemed. And if someone behaves significantly badly, then we have the right to impose a temporary ban for their sake and the sake of the church.

We've had encounters when someone walked into the church saying he was looking for someone. He had a big raincoat on and revealed that he had sewn in large knives into the coat because he had come to kill someone. Machetes and bread knives. We've also had a member of the congregation leap over two rows and try to bite the nose off another member of the congregation, because he was going out with someone he went out with. We've had people having sex and taking drugs in the toilets. We have to say, 'We really like you, but we don't like what you're doing.' So, we must stop them coming for a while and withdraw them from services for a while. This means they cannot access the meals and community centres that come with the church community. It feels hard, but it's tough love. A ban can be for a week or two weeks. We've only imposed a long ban once. And they must come back with an apology. We thought that they would never come back, but they did.

One woman came to faith and gave up a heroin addiction, but her body was so knackered by the drugs that she died young at 48. Another man, who had come and wept because he wanted to be loved, died of a drugs overdose. Another person was murdered in the toilets for the sake of £5 that someone wanted for buying drugs. Even if the world crashes because they screwed up, they were still deserving of God's love. I don't tell these stories very often because you can wear them like badges and say, 'Look what we've done', and that doesn't honour the people to whom this happens. But we still work with people who hate themselves and who are asking 'How do I do this?' meaning, 'How do I live?'

If one takes the view that church is for all, and not just for the middle class or the well-educated, then faith is for all and social justice is for all. towards those in society who most people would prefer not to see or think they should all be in jail.

We have accompanied members of our congregation to magistrate's hearings and family courts about child custody. Social justice is for everyone, not just for those who can afford it or understand it. Our benefits system is terribly complicated and difficult to understand. At our community centre, which is our daughter organisation, we have a footfall of 33,000 a year. We provide support around health, money, debt, advice on rights and helping people to access the benefits they are entitled to.

We take Matthew 25:35–40 seriously – when did we see you thirsty? This is updated to: when did we help someone fill out a benefits form or accompany you to a magistrate's hearing? Through relationship we have earned the right to speak into people's lives and help them. We don't think of Matthew 25 as a command. It arises more organically.

Our compassion grew out of having our hearts broken because of what we saw. It caused us to have a desire to engage more intentionally with those who are in significant need. In other

words, it encouraged us to get out more to meet people where they were.

Long gone are the days where people flocked to church. We need to be out and about, getting outside the church walls and meeting people where they are.

When we did this and started caring about the things that they care about and started building real relationships, that's when God started doing good, awesome stuff. The kind of stuff that only he can do. The kind of stuff that blows you away. Because our intentional relationship-building allowed us to authentically speak hope, self-worth and love into the lives of those who often feel like they have been forgotten or feel like they are unimportant, unwanted or have no voice.

## Ignite

And that's where Ignite comes in. Ignite didn't start as a clever PCC strategy. Ignite is a Christian faith community, but it's got no strings attached. People choose how much or how little they buy into the whole Christianity idea. Our aim is to build a community that values and builds people up regardless of their level of faith, because we believe that offering community is profoundly important in and of itself. Good community supports and encourages and values. Good community breathes life into people. It doesn't suck life out of them.

Jesus said, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink' (see John 7:37-38). And so, if we are thinking about what it means to give drink to those who are thirsty, then I suppose you could say that in the middle of a challenging world, a largely unkind world, a world where many people are pushed aside or relegated to society's margins, then an Ignite community tries to be an oasis. It tries to be an oasis where people can have both their spiritual and physical thirst quenched in the most gentle

and user-friendly way possible. We provide the opportunity for people to meet Jesus and to drink if they want to.

In addition to being a Christian faith community, Ignite also does something fundamentally important, because it recognises that we are all on this journey together.

It's a shared learning experience. As Christian practitioners, we're not just giving out answers. We are also learning from those who we engage with. We grapple with hard questions together. We don't always agree on the answers, but together we move deeper into our relationship with each other and more importantly, in our relationship with Jesus.

## Refreshment and refuge

As guests arrive at an Ignite gathering, they are met and welcomed, and they're given a name label so that everyone can be addressed and known by name. It's such an innocuous little thing, but having our name known is a big deal to God. It's mentioned numerous times in scripture, 'I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine' (Isaiah 43:1). It reminds me of the theme tune for the 1980s American sitcom *Cheers*, which included a line about going to a place 'where everybody knows your name'. The show is particularly appropriate and poignant, because *Cheers* was based in a bar where people went to have a drink and to be with friends and to share their woes. Someone knowing your name is so powerful and affirming. It highlights that we are alive, that we have a place in this world and that we matter.

Someone knowing your name is so powerful and affirming. It highlights that we are alive, that we have a place in this world and that we matter.



People have dared to come to Ignite thirsty for something they probably couldn't even articulate. They needed friendship, companionship, love. They needed a God who could give them all of that and much, much more. Dare I say that many of them are a bit like the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well; the woman who has been ostracised by her community because of the way that she has lived her life, particularly with men. She goes and gets water when there's nobody else there. She doesn't go at the popular times. She goes at the times maybe when the sun is at its hottest. She has lost her voice within the community. But in her engagement with Jesus, even though he's the one who initially asks her for a drink, she realises the depths of her own need for spiritual water. And Jesus is the drink that she needs. And suddenly, and I love this, she finds her voice. Suddenly she is vocally celebrating what she has discovered: 'Come quick. Come, and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah? Quick, come.'

## Resonating out

She drank from living water and found a voice. And in the same way, but perhaps not such a dramatic way, many people coming to Ignite discover their voice of encouragement. At Ignite, faith permeates all that we do, and guests decide for themselves at what level they participate. They choose how much they want to drink, whether to just have a sip or to go all in like the Samaritan woman. They might just choose to dip in and out or simply enjoy our hospitality, and that's great; we want them to come. Or they might engage with the activities and the discussions, as a means of socialising or building themselves up, which is fantastic. Or they might choose to allow themselves to be open to an ever-present faith that exists within, to gradually lead them into a transformational encounter with our amazing and loving God.

Over the years many people who have come to Ignite have been baptised, and I've had the privilege of baptising many adults.

Coincidentally, St Paul's Church is the only Anglican church in the diocese where people can be baptised by full immersion. Many people recognise that there is something inherently powerful about not just having a drink, but being all in and under the water and coming up as a new creation.

There's a man from Ramsgate who said: 'It's not like church. It's not religious, more like a social club. But I have learned a lot about God.' I think this is high praise indeed. And it paints a beautiful picture of God's church that I absolutely love to bits. But I say, in all seriousness, I am a semi-competent screw-up who loves Jesus and who has discovered that I need to drink from him myself often.

## What people who attend Ignite say about it

*'It's just getting out and meeting people and having somewhere to go when times are crap!'*

*'Before I met Patrick and Debbie I was a horrible person – and I mean horrible! I met Patrick and Debbie and started coming to Ignite and it just changed me. I got my faith back, I was baptised, and now I work here as well. It changed me for the better.'*

*'It was really like coming across my faith for the first time. I would never have walked in here on a Sunday. It was the gentle way that Ignite brought me in, teaching me a few things, and about me asking, "Who are these crazy people and why do they care about me? I'd like to get to know them."'*

*'My faith has been challenged a lot over the past couple of years and I thought God had deserted me and left me. I come here and everyone sort of lifts me up. We have a chat and a pray, and I feel lifted. It puts everything back into perspective. It's a good thing.'*

*'It is really good fun and it's good to see people coming in and rid of their problems for a little while and learning how better to deal with their problems, because they have people who care and listen and help them and don't judge them.'*

*'It's about meeting people where they are, wherever it may be, in their brokenness, in their sense of being lost, and trying to find them and help them find a way to make sense of this crazy world we live in.'*

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## Reflection

- Where do you find relationships, resonance and refuge?
- Who in your community needs your friendship? Do you know their name?
- What does God have to say to you about the living water of Christ?
- What is Christ saying to you at Jacob's well?



## A prayer

*O God, who breathed over the waters to create life, pour into our hearts your refreshing, saving gift of eternal love. Help us, we pray, to share the resources of our planet with all those who are thirsty for refreshment and relationship – with you and with one another. May those who thirst be satisfied in body and soul. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the living water. Amen.*



## A spiritual exercise

### Prepare yourself for prayer

Sit comfortably with both feet on the ground and hands open on your lap as if waiting to receive a gift from God. Let go of your worries or

thoughts and entrust yourself and everything to God. Pray that you will be receptive to what God has to say to you in this scripture reading.

Read the passage below out loud, slowly and meditatively. Listen for words or phrases that speak to you. Sit with it for a while.

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

MATTHEW 26:26-30

### **Meditate**

Read these verses again. This time, let the words or phrases that stood out for you the first time become an invitation from God to speak with him. Allow the words to flow through you as you meditate upon them.

### **Pray**

Now read the passage a third time, slowly.

### **Ask**

- What is God saying to you in these words?
- What do you want to say to God?
- What feelings are stirred within you?
- Share your answers with God.

### **Contemplate**

Read the text one last time, and this time let the words you have been praying with go free. Be still and at peace with God.

### Ask

- What gift has God given you to take away?
- What action might God be inviting you to undertake?
- Thank God for this gift and for his invitation.

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### Further resources

Allison Allen, *Thirsty for More: Discovering God's unexpected blessings in a desert season* (Revell, 2018).

“A more relaxed environment” – Estates Churches: St Paul's Cliftonville, Margate, YouTube video, [youtube.com/watch?v=X1Bfaqp8YOg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1Bfaqp8YOg).

Patrick and Debbie Ellisdon, *Ignite* (BRF, forthcoming 2025).

Hannah Hall, *Thirsty: 12 weeks of drinking deeply from God's word* (Revell, 2022).

Ignite, [canterburydiocese.org/mission/ignite](https://www.canterburydiocese.org/mission/ignite)

Mez McConnell, *The Least, the Last and the Lost: Understanding poverty in the UK and the responsibility of the local church* (Evangelical Press, 2021).

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Ave Maria Press, 2006).





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