

Ruth 1:1-18

Love, actually

We hear the story of Elimelech, a man from Judah, his wife Naomi and their two sons. Famine forces them to flee to Moab. The sons marry local women but then they and Elimelech die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, as widows in precarious situations. Naomi decides to return to Judah, urging Orpah and Ruth to find new husbands and security. Ruth, however, refuses, vowing to stay with Naomi and to follow her God.



Give what you can to Christian Aid global emergency fund.



Read



Go to the local library and check out books about refugees. Use the QR code to see some picture book suggestions.

REFLECT



Reflect and pray for conflict situations around the world, for peace, for world leaders, for victims of war and for aid to get to those who need it most. These two websites may help.

Bible notes



Biblical scholar Paula Gooder suggests that 'The book of Ruth is the ultimate love story. Love in the Old and New Testaments is much more about what you do than how you feel. Ruth has *hesed* (steadfast love) not because she talks about her emotion of love towards Naomi but because the whole of her life is lived out in expression of that love'. It is also an unusual love story, set in the violent times of the Book of Judges. The stories of Judges show the disaster that came about when God's people turned away from God. By contrast, Ruth shows the blessing that came to a foreigner who turned to Israel's God, and so became part of his faithful people. It also shows how those of different ethnicities and cultures can live together harmoniously. It has a lot to say to the times we live in.

The land of Moab was to the south-west of Israel. The two fought often and Moab also raided and looted Israel when she had been defeated by other enemies. A Moabite woman would have been regarded as the lowest of the low (a bit like the Samaritans at the time of the Gospels). Knowing that life could be hard for her as a widow and even harder still for Orpah and Ruth as both widows and foreigners, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their homes. Orpah and Ruth make different choices. While Ruth becomes the central figure of the book and celebrated for her choice, it is interesting to note that there is no criticism of the choice that Orpah makes – a reminder perhaps that when it comes to big family decisions, it is often a case of different choices rather than right or wrong ones.

First impressions

- What is refuge for you?
- How are refugees received in your community?
- In what ways can we follow the examples of Ruth and Naomi, and show 'love, actually' to other people?



Pray

Lord, you are a God of love.
You call us to love everyone,
wherever they're from, whoever they are.
You call us to love family, friends and strangers.
You call us to love... *(name people you know, and outsiders in your community)*.
Amen.



Donate food to your local food bank or social supermarket. Get involved in the Trussell Trust's campaigns around food poverty in the UK. You can sign a petition online.

Ruth 3:1-5,4:13-17

Giving beyond obligation

Naomi encourages Ruth to dress in her finest clothes and to pay a visit to their kinsman, Boaz. Going beyond familial duty, Boaz takes Ruth as his wife and she gives birth to a son, Obed, who will be the grandfather of King David.



Write

Write a letter to someone in your family and tell them what you love about them.

WATCH



Watch a video version of the story of Ruth from the Bible Project or Saddleback Kids.



BAKE



Bake some piñata cupcakes with a hidden pocket of sweets inside the cake under the icing. They are more than what's expected. Share these with a neighbour or someone who is new to your community.

Bible notes



This is a significant story in many ways, not least for its importance in the genealogies of David and Jesus. It is also a complex one, especially in the interaction between Ruth and Boaz. Commentators from different theological perspectives offer varied interpretations of their relationship. Boaz is presented as the kinsman of Naomi and Ruth. The word kinsman literally means 'acquaintance'. As such, Boaz was not obligated to help (as Ruth had not been obligated to help Naomi). There is a degree of ambiguity about the meaning of the phrase 'uncover his feet,' but Ruth's actions clearly demonstrate her obedience to her mother in law and her vulnerable trust. Boaz chooses to extend further care and love for her and Naomi, by taking Ruth as his wife. At the time, when a widow (Ruth in this instance) had a child with a subsequent husband (Boaz) the baby would be reckoned to be that of the deceased first husband. And they say relationships are complicated today! It does explain why the baby is said to be Naomi's next-of-kin. And again, it's interesting to note that not every relationship in the family tree of Jesus was straightforward. In the midst of all the twists and turns of the story, Ruth is presented as a model of obedience but also as one with the strength of mind to choose what she believed was the right way.

First impressions

- When has someone gone 'above and beyond' for you?
- Have you ever done more than what is expected for someone? How did they react?
- What loving action could you do for someone else this week?



Pray

Loving God,
whether we can offer a lot (*arms thrown wide*)
or just a little: (*forefinger and thumb together*)
Take our little (*forefinger and thumb together*)
and do a lot. (*arms thrown wide*)
Amen.



DRAW



Draw a picture of someone you love as a present to them.
Caption: I love this person!

1 Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10

What song shall we sing?

Hannah, the childless wife of Elkanah, presents herself before the Lord at Shiloh and asks for a son, who she promises to give back to God. Observing her fervent prayer, Eli accuses her of drunkenness, but then blesses her. In due time, Hannah gives birth to her son, Samuel. Hannah's subsequent song of praise celebrates how God reverses the fortunes of the poor and powerless while overturning the might of the powerful.



Write

a song in response to Hannah's song – use an app like Lyric Notepad to record lyrics.



a pineapple upside-down cake. Things can feel rather odd and unusual when you're making a cake like this. It goes against everything you know of as a baker. Yet when you turn it upside down, it all makes sense. God has a habit of turning things upside down, as we can see in Hannah's song. God's transformational power can turn our sorrow into joy.



Make your own Inheritance Track playlist. Build a playlist of songs that mean something to you. Maybe these are ones that help you when you're sad, or celebrate with you when you're happy. Build the playlist individually or as a family, either way share this playlist with others so you can sing your own Hannah Song.

Bible notes

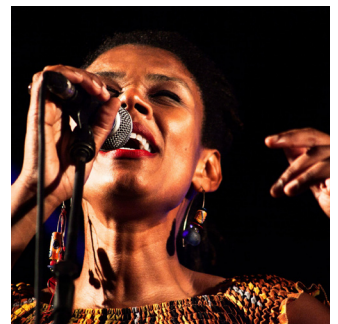


A new chapter in Israel's story opens with the birth of Samuel, who goes on to anoint Saul and then David as Israel's first kings (1 Samuel 10:1ff, 16:1ff). In an unstable and anarchic world, the tribes have no king to lead them against their Philistine enemies (Judges 21:25), and the shrine at Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant has been housed since Joshua's time (Joshua 18:1), is corrupted by Eli's sons (1 Samuel 2:12ff). Yet here we find a devout family with a husband devoted to a wife unable to bear children. In Hannah's world a woman's infertility is more than a medical issue. It is seen as God's withholding the gift of sharing his creative power (v.6; cf Genesis 1:22), ample reason for mockery and humiliation. Elkanah's well-meaning compassion can't compensate for Hannah's lack of a son (1:5, 8). She has to endure Peninnah's persistent provocation, which is aggravated by the annual pilgrimage to a festival that celebrates the earth's God-given fertility. It has become an occasion for rehearsing her woe. We can imagine Hannah's silent song as she worships – lamentation tinged with hopeful petition and promise. If only God would remember her by removing her shame, she would willingly dedicate her son to God's service. She is empowered as she prays, enough to correct the venerable priest Eli's misreading of her silent prayer and win his blessing (1:12-18). Her final act of worship is no doubt filled with songs of joy and thanksgiving. She leaves for home a transformed woman (v.18), and later conceives as a result of Elkanah's 'knowing her' and God's 'remembering her' (1:19-20). Surprisingly for modern readers, once Samuel is weaned, his parents leave him at Shiloh with Eli, his life an offering to God's service (1:21-28).

Hannah's song doesn't seem to fit her circumstances, apart from mentioning barrenness in verse 5. But its shape outlines the transformation of her distress into joy and praise. So Hannah's prayer becomes the model for Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55 as they both celebrate God's exaltation of the humble poor.

First impressions

- What song would you like to sing right now – one of joy/sorrow/something else?
- When have you prayed wholeheartedly to God?
- What situations would you like to see transformed from sorrow to joy?



Pray

Lord, where people feel feeble, make them strong.
Where people are hungry, may they be filled.
Where people feel down, may they be lifted up.
Where people are crying,
may their sadness turn into song.
Amen.



your prayers. Put on some instrumental music or pick up a musical instrument to accompany you as you pour out your heart to God.

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14

King Jesus: Pictured and promised

On Christ the King Sunday, we encounter Daniel's vision of 'one like a human being' being given everlasting kingship over all peoples, nations and languages.



LISTEN

Listen to 'Behold him' by Paul Baloche.



BAKE



Make some gingerbread biscuits shaped as crowns and decorate them with various symbolic sweets. Jelly Babies: Jesus is one of us. Chocolate stars: Jesus is king of everything. Smarties: Jesus is king of everyone. Love Hearts: Jesus loves and cares for us all.

CREATE

Using modelling clay, or by drawing, create a finger labyrinth that leads from any start point to the centre, where God is represented. Search for examples online to help you get started. These labyrinths can help us to focus on God, as we draw near to the centre, in quiet prayer.

Bible notes



The Book of Daniel is set during Israel's exile in Babylon (c597-538 BC), but was probably written for a later crisis around 160 BC that raised essentially the same issue: 'How can we live faithfully as God's people when the powers that govern the world are against us?' This passage is part of Daniel's first of four visions in the second half of the book. They all have much the same message. God's victory over his people's enemies is assured and will soon be entrusted to his faithful people. Daniel sees four terrifying beasts, symbolising four earthly rulers, emerging from the sea (Daniel 7:1-8). Then he sees the heavenly throne room, where God, 'the Ancient One', presides over the heavenly court (vv.9-10). Here is a picture of God who is beyond human imagination. God's shining, fiery appearance symbolises everlasting power, glory and holiness, worthy of all worship. The fourth beast with its 10 horns is put to death (v.11), the other three lose their authority but still live. Then Daniel sees 'one like a human being' (some Bible versions translate this as 'a son of man') coming with clouds before God's throne, and this figure is given universal and everlasting dominion (vv.13-14). Here is a picture of humans – 'the holy ones of the Most High' (vv.18,27), God's people who, like Daniel, remain faithful despite oppression – who are promised a share in God's victory over evil empires. Jesus reinterprets Daniel's vision and applies it to himself, to show what it means to be God's Messiah (see especially Mark 8:31-9:1; 14:62). Like Daniel, Jesus trusts in God's promise to vindicate him and his faithful followers in the face of every evil.

First impressions

- What do you think this image represents?
- How do you picture King Jesus?
- What pictures and promises help to sustain you in your faith?



Pray

Dear Lord,
thank that you are King of kings, and Lord of lords.
We pray that your kingdom would come,
and your will be done,
more and more in our lives,
in our communities,
and in our world.
Amen.



Type some of the descriptions from Daniel 7:9-10 into an AI image generator like Google Gemini to discover how Daniel's dream might have looked.

Luke 21:25-36

Hopeful beginnings

On the first Sunday of Advent, Jesus speaks of signs that the kingdom of God is near. We are to be alert to them so that we are not caught out unawares.



WALK

Go for a walk and look/listen for signs of hope. These might be things like green shoots, birdsong or berries, but it might also be something like an advert for a community café – anything that represents hope to you. Thank God for each sign of hope you see.

REFLECT

When you spend time talking to God, remember that one day Jesus will return; how does this change the way you pray?

LOOK

The themes for the four weeks of Advent are Hope, Love, Joy and Peace. This first week is Hope. Take a camera or sketch pad and pens out with you. Find and record the letters of the Advent 'word of the week.' You could make them into a greeting card.

Bible notes



This is the latter part of Jesus' sermon by the Temple before his final meal with his disciples and his arrest. The language and imagery are drawn from the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 13:10, 24:19; Joel 2:10), who speak of the unravelling of the order of creation as God's judgement dawns. Luke suggests that this has already begun in the distress caused by the destruction of Jerusalem (see Luke 21:20ff). Like Mark, Luke hears Jesus speaking into his time and place, here to believers living in a Roman city, in words that have abiding significance (vv.32-33). The 'Son of Man coming in a cloud' (v.27) is mysterious but Jesus sees himself as Daniel's glorious figure, who, despite his rejection by powerful earthly rulers, is honoured by God.

Luke is the only one of the evangelists to write a second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, which narrates the outcome of Jesus' divine vindication – the birth of God's messianic people through the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' parable of the fig tree and its springtime leaves anticipates this. With their hope-filled birthright, Jesus' followers must avoid being dragged down by distractions, like the seed that falls among thorns in Jesus' parable of the sower (v.34; cf Luke 8:7,14). Instead, they are called to be alert and prayerful enough to look beyond themselves (vv.28,36), which is what Jesus expects of his three closest disciples just before his arrest (Luke 22:39-46) and to hold their nerve in whatever crises they face, as they wait for the day of God's kingdom (v.31).

First impressions

- What things in nature bring you hope?
- What are you hoping for right now?
- What is your prayer at the start of Advent?



Pray

Lord Jesus,
you are the one who makes all things new,
who forgives us for our mistakes,
and gives us a chance to start again.
You alone are the hope of this world. Amen.



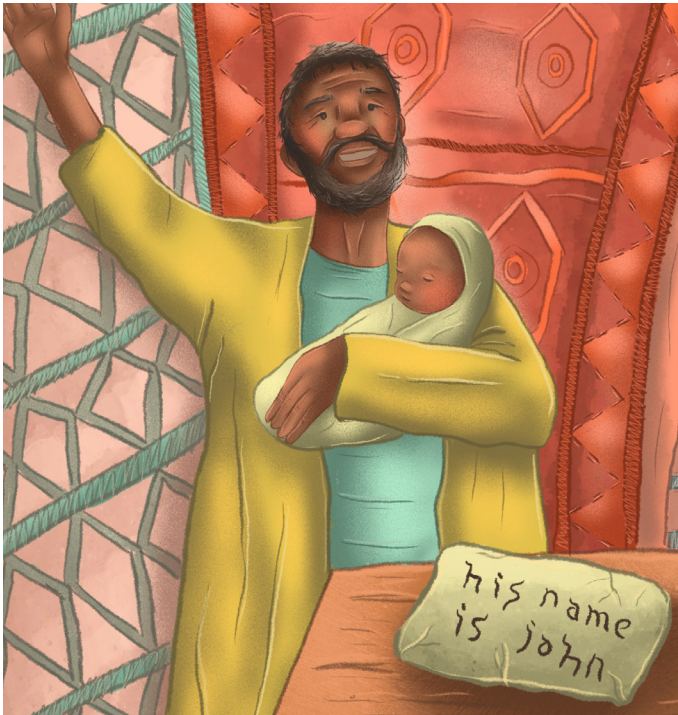
CREATE

Use an online search or a concordance to look up Bible verses about hope in God. Which verses are most helpful? Write the hopeful verses on discs of coloured card to hang on your Christmas tree.

Luke 1:68-70

A loving plan

This passage is known as the Song of Zechariah. The elderly priest has been mute since he refused to believe the angel Gabriel's message that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son who would be 'great in the sight of the Lord'. Here, filled with the Holy Spirit, he breaks his silence and praises God for fulfilling his loving plan to free his people from their enemies.



Cut coloured paper into heart shapes and write verses about God's love on them. Leave them in unexpected places during the week; inside a library book, under a menu, on a shop shelf, left on a café table, on a bus seat, for people to find.

REFLECT

Take time to reflect on what has happened in your life over the past year or more. Look for ways in which God has worked out for things to happen to you, around you, or through you to bring his message of love home to you or someone else.

LOOK

Get outside and watch the sunrise or sunset. Remember God's faithful love that shines on us day after day.

Bible notes



Zechariah's song is known to many as the Benedictus. The elderly priest breaks the silence that descended when he doubted the angel's message that his wife would bear a much-wanted son (Luke 1:8-20). His first words for months praise God – not for releasing his own tongue, but for fulfilling his loving plan to free his people from their enemies. It is a mark of his confidence in God that he can celebrate the coming of the long-promised Saviour before he is even born (vv.69-75). He knows that God's purposes for Israel are unshakeable and have deep roots in his promises to Abraham and the house of David. Notice how broadly-based God's salvation is: deliverance from foreign oppression and the fear this induces (v.74), so that his people can be free to serve God (vv.74-75); forgiveness alongside political freedom (v.77). These often come together in the prophets, who see defeat and captivity as the consequence of Israel's repeated unfaithfulness (e.g. Isaiah 40:1ff).

Like the prophets and poets before him, Zechariah rejoices because God prefers to remember his ancient promises and plans rather than Israel's chronic failures. As God's messenger and prophet, his son John will herald the dawning of a new age. Its freedom and forgiveness will be like the light of a new day that rises on those who have lived for too long in the dark night of exile and foreign occupation. Light that shines by God's 'tender mercy' (v.78) is a reliable guide for the coming new world that the promised saviour will bring, one that is at peace with itself because God's loving plans for all people are at last being revealed and realised.

First impressions

- What involved in planning a special event for a loved one?
- How is God's plan revealed through the story of Zechariah?
- What loving plans can you make during Advent?



Pray

Creator God,
you are wonderfully big.
You made the stars and the seas.
You made us and you love us.
Sometimes we don't understand all your plans.
But may we always know your great love.
Amen.



LISTEN



Listen to 'Your Plans for Us', by Eleventh Hour Worship on **BEHOLD**.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Joyful news?

The prophet Zephaniah calls for rejoicing and singing at the removal of God's judgement on his people and the turning away of their enemies. God is in their midst, the outcast will be gathered in and their previous shame changed into praise.



Make a decorative paper chain from strips of paper. Think of people who bring joy into your life and write each name on a strip of coloured paper. Leave the pack of paper strips and the pen out where you will see it for a few days and write more names as they come to you. Each time you write a name take a minute to thank God for that person and to pray for them. Hang your paper chain where it will remind you of these joy-bringers.

LISTEN



Listen to Chris Tomlin's song Joy, unspeakable joy. Compare the lyrics of the song with the reading from Zephaniah. Look for similarities in the ways in which we celebrate joy in the run up to Christmas and the joy expressed at God's work in Zephaniah.

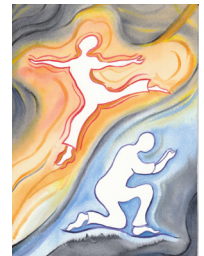
Bible notes



Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of the reforming King Josiah (Zephaniah 1:1; 640-609 BC). He is known for his striking images of 'the day of the Lord' (e.g. 1:14-18), which brings God's judgement on Jerusalem's enemies and salvation for his humble people. Some of these images are particularly disturbing whenever there is war in the Middle East, and God is seen as 'the king of Israel' (v.15) in the midst of Jerusalem, 'a warrior who gives victory' (v.17). So, we must take great care how we interpret this short book. These closing verses call for rejoicing because God's people are no longer living under the divine judgement that had them deported from their ancestral land to Babylon. During this exile, they would have been aware of the oppressive presence of a foreign king dominating their daily existence. But now it is not their enemies but 'the king of Israel, the Lord [who] is in your midst' (v.15). In their world, the most powerful are those with the biggest armies and the most effective fighters. So, it is not surprising that Zephaniah pictures the Lord as he does. But he modifies his image: 'he will renew you in his love' (v.17). His people's 60-year exile was ended by the Persian king Cyrus seizing power in Babylon in 539 BC. He then allowed exiled nations to return home. Isaiah 44:24ff (which most scholars date towards the end of the exile) sees Cyrus as the Lord's anointed. The return home is the reason for the gladness seen at festival times (vv.17-18). Joy renews confidence, removes fear and shame, and holds out the prospect of national renewal. This is good news, especially for those who feel particularly excluded, such as the lame and the outcast, who can now believe that they too have a future.

First impressions

- What brings you joy?
- Where in the world/your community would you like to see more of God's joy?
- What opportunities do you have to share the joy of Advent this week?

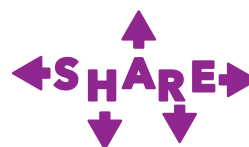


Pray

Give us joy in our hearts,
keep us praising because of your love for us.
Give us your joy and peace,
even when things go wrong.
May we bring joy to other people who are sad.
Give us joy in our hearts, keep us praising,
keep us praising till the break of day.
Amen.



Pray for those who you know, or those you read about in the news who are experiencing difficulties at this time. Pray for them to experience God's joyful news.



Share a story from your life where you have experienced God's joyful news.

Luke 1:46b-55

Peace, actually

Mary, who has found out she will give birth to the Messiah, is visiting her cousin Elizabeth, who is also unexpectedly pregnant. She breaks out in a song of praise for what God has done in her life and God's faithfulness to his promises.



Use a nativity scene or small world characters to play out this part of the story of Mary meeting Elizabeth, and singing a song of praise, before you get ready for Christmas itself.



Some churches use the phrase, 'The peace of the Lord be with you' in church to greet each other and share peace. Try finding a place in your week where you can use this phrase (and mean it), at work, at home or when meeting friends.



LISTEN

Listen to the Prayer of St Francis by Sarah McLachlan.



Bible notes



This is Mary's song of praise when she arrives at the house of her relative Elizabeth, after travelling south from her home in Galilee to the hills around Jerusalem. Mary's Magnificat resembles Hannah's song (see 1 Samuel 2:1-10), though it is more personal, full of joy and hope because of the salvation she carries in her body. Notice how it pictures the movement of God's grace. It starts by recalling God's favour towards her lowliness (v.48; cf Luke 1:30). As it moves outwards, its message becomes more radical. God will transform the injustices enjoyed by those who are rich and well-fed into blessings for the humble and hungry. So Mary looks forward to a salvation that can be seen, tasted and embodied in the lives of ordinary people. The Magnificat doesn't specifically mention peace; this has to wait until the angels' Gloria when Mary's son is born (Luke 2:14). Yet the hallmarks of peace are evident in; God's readiness to bless the lowly (v.48); the mercy that flows from one generation to another (v.50); and the way divine strength re-orders the world to benefit the humble poor (vv.51-53). In all this God is said to 'look', 'remember' and 'help' – language that suggests the humanity and intimacy of God's dealings with his people. Mary expects salvation to feature in the day-to-day life of ordinary people. But its radical peace doesn't come cost-free, as Mary will discover when she takes her child to the Temple (Luke 2:33-35). Her song of joy will one day turn to lamentation, like Jesus' tears for Jerusalem, which cannot be true to its name as 'city of peace' because it misses the moment of God's visitation (Luke 19:41ff).

First impressions

- What is the message of the Knife Angel?
- What does 'Peace, actually' mean to you?
- What opportunities are there to experience peace this Advent?



Pray

Creator God,
you made a perfect world, full of good things.
But it has got broken and messy.
Yet, we know that you're bigger than the mess.
You're restoring all that is broken,
offering your peace to all who accept it.
Amen.



REFLECT

Think back to times when your peace was disturbed by what other people did and those times when you got angry, and your behaviour changed with your anger. Prayerfully take time to let God show you what triggers your anger and what disturbs your peace. Be honest with God and pray for an extra growth of the Holy Spirit fruits of peace, patience and self-control.

Luke 2:41-52

Learning and growing

The 12-year-old Jesus and his parents visit Jerusalem for the Passover festival. On the return journey to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph realise that Jesus is missing. After a frantic three-day search they find him in the Temple, sitting at the feet of the teachers, asking questions and astounding all with his understanding.



Bible notes



This is the only account in the Gospels of an incident from the childhood of Jesus. His family are as close as they are devout. Like Samuel's, they make their annual Passover pilgrimage to the Temple shrine, travelling with relatives and friends in what is perhaps the nearest they get to an annual holiday. Mary and Joseph notice that Jesus is missing from their party on the way home from Jerusalem. They are astonished to find him in the Temple, and the teachers are also amazed by Jesus' questions and answers (vv.47-48). Curious and quick to learn, he is now at home in his heavenly Father's house. We shouldn't see Jesus here as a stropky almost-teenager, making a bid for independence and freedom. That would be to place him in our world. Jewish boys of his age would be moving from the security of home, family and village into the uncertainties of the public world. His mother wouldn't have been much older when she travelled south from Nazareth in Galilee to stay with Zechariah and Elizabeth in Judea. There is every reason to believe that Joseph and Mary have been good enough parents to bring Jesus to this moment, and that they continue to nurture his growth and maturity (v.52). But they too have a lot to learn. Though he returns obediently to their household, life there will never be the same. Jesus is starting to prepare for all that his heavenly Father's house symbolises. Twenty years on from this incident, his conversations with the Temple authorities will take a more sinister turn, as curiosity turns into the kind of questioning that eventually brings about his execution.

First impressions

- What is it like to be 12 years old?
- How would you like to learn and grow in the next year?
- What can we learn from people of different generations?



LISTEN



Listen to 'Grow as we go' by Ben Platt and Sara Bareilles and think about the people who help you grow. How can you help your friends and family grow in their faith this year?



When family members get together, ask older relatives for stories of their childhood. What was important then that is still important now? What did people a generation ago think was wonderfully new that is just taken for granted now?

REFLECT

What do you think Jesus discussed with the leaders in the Temple? What questions would you like to ask about God?

Pray

Lord Jesus,
you are bigger than our imagination,
more complex than our assumptions.
Your grace is deeper than we can fathom.
We can never tire of getting to know you.
Amen.



Write

Take some time as an individual or family to talk or reflect on the different ways that you grew and learnt more about and from God last year. In what areas would you like to learn and grow this year? Write down how you hope to grow and put this somewhere you will see it regularly.