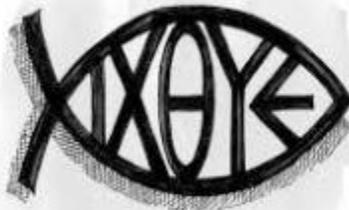


Faith Acrostics

half-hour Bible and five-minute reflections



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Introduction

What's an acrostic? It's a cross between a puzzle and a poem in which the initial letters of each line spell out a word or phrase. Sometimes they rhyme, sometimes they scan, often they do neither. They are fun, but they can be thought-provoking.

They are difficult to write. Often, the very letters you most need to make a particular point are absent from the acrostic word. That, however, is part of their beauty – you are forced to look at the word from different angles until you finally see a way of creating an acrostic. After reflecting and meditating on the word, an original and insightful perspective slowly reveals itself. Sometimes.

This collection comprises a non-rhyming acrostic for each chapter of the Bible, interspersed with (mostly) rhyming acrostics on Christian themes. The latter were originally written as individual items for reflection and meditation. The *Acrostic Bible* was written as a rapid introduction for the newcomer and a racy refresher for those more familiar with scripture. Here, I have re-cast them in an integrated manner so that the *reflections* can be set in context. As might be expected, the acrostics relating to New Testament themes are far more numerous than those relating to the Old Testament. However, this should not downplay the importance of the Old Testament as a focus for reflection as many ideas in the New Testament have older precedent, and I have tried to draw this out when referencing Bible verses.

The **Bible Acrostics** posed a particular challenge. Some long and complex books have very short titles, such as Job and John. It's clearly impossible to do justice to such monumental works in three or four lines, and so the acrostic aims to give a simple flavour of the contents. Others – such as Thessalonians – have far more letters than you need, but this gives the writer more time to include aspects that have been squeezed out elsewhere

The **Reflective Acrostics** touch upon aspects of faith and life experience. They have generally arisen in response to questions raised

in sermons, during house group meetings or in conversations. Some of them made their first appearance in our church magazine. In every case, I hope they open up an unexpected way of looking at a familiar topic.

All of the acrostics come together through the theme of *faith*. Faith is often used as a synonym for religion, perhaps because it sounds less controversial and institutional. We often talk about people of different faiths. However, for the Christian, it has a particular significance. The Judaeo-Christian narrative holds that God created a perfect world which was made imperfect through human disobedience (initially, Adam and Eve). Since God is perfect light, unrighteous humans cannot, through their own strength, be reconciled. Righteousness must be reckoned or credited to us by divine grace so that we can live in relationship with God.

Early in the Bible, Abraham is called in old age to become a father of many and travel to a distant land (Genesis 15:6). Because he has faith in God's word, righteousness is reckoned to him. His wife Sarah is equally involved in this promise. Later, God's law is given to Israel through Moses and, whilst this provides a basis for just living, it cannot bring newness of life. It was only through Jesus that reconciliation could occur. Through faith in Jesus, righteousness can be credited to everyone who believes (for instance, Hebrews 11:1; Romans 4:3-5). Acrostically speaking:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen
Abraham believed God's promise, hardly knowing what it could mean
In so doing, God reckoned him righteous, in a way no law could contravene
Through faith, that righteousness is ours, for God's promise is evergreen
Hoping in Jesus, we are perfected and through his blood are washed clean.

Faith can be nurtured in many ways, one of which is by reflection and meditation. Sometimes faith is easy and we find ourselves being led through green pastures. At times it is a challenge, and we may walk through the darkest valley. As noted previously, these acrostics have been written at different times in response to different circumstances. They relate to happy times and difficult times; they reflect joy and they

confront grief. They might provide an answer or may provoke a thought.

Many people find they have a special place where they encounter God most readily – a ‘thin place’. The following acrostic, despite not rhyming, has proved popular and provides a starting point for a shared journey.

Thin Places

Time pauses and
Heaven touches earth
In special places where
Nearness to God suddenly happens.

Present meets eternity,
Light dazzles
And we encounter the living God.
City or country, garden or wildness:
Everyone finds their oasis, a
Still point of calm and sanctuary.

In your trysting place, read on...

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament – the scriptures which Jesus and the disciples knew – broadly divides into the following sections.

The Pentateuch – the first five books – deal with the origins of God’s chosen people, and the civil and religious laws given to Moses.

The History books start with the conquest of Canaan, reach a high point of a united and peaceful Israel, before the descent to division, defeat and captivity. Some of the main books here are ‘two parters’ and in the case of I Samuel and II Samuel, and I Kings and II Kings, I have written two acrostics each because there is so much ground to cover. However, with I and II Chronicles I’ve just written one, because it gives the writer ten lines in which to recapitulate on earlier material.

The Poetry books contain wisdom (much of which is attributed to Solomon) and poetry, chiefly the Psalms (many of which were composed by David).

The books of the Prophets are collections of writings by people who were brave enough to speak out against the power-brokers of their day. Sometimes they made predictions about the future, but mainly their ‘prophecy’ entailed speaking out against manifest injustice or interpreting the signs of their times. Conventionally they are divided into ‘major’ and ‘minor’ prophets according to the length of their books, but even the minor prophets pack a powerful punch.

The Pentateuch

Genesis

God began everything by creating heavenly order and earthly abundance
Eden was our perfect home, but through disobedience we spoilt it
Noah alone was righteous and survived the flood of God's wrath
Even then, men preferred Babel sounds to angel voices, until Abraham,
Sarah and their descendants heeded God's promise to become a holy nation.
In jealousy, Jacob's sons sold Joseph into Egyptian slavery, yet he
Saved them from famine and found them a home in Goshen.

Exodus

Egypt proved to be a cruel cradling for the Israelites
Xenophobic Pharaoh tolerated them as forced labour
Only when Moses and Aaron brought God's wrath on Egypt's firstborn
Did Pharaoh let them go, and then his pursuing army foundered
Under the Red Sea. In the desert God provided for Israel and on
Sinai's heights gave them commands and laws befitting a holy people.

Leviticus

Laws given to Moses on Sinai were a blessing, not a yoke –
Establishing a way of living in safety, fairness and abundance.
Vines and fields were to be rested, and servants and property redeemed,
In Sabbath and Jubilee years. Israel was not to live according to
The customs of other nations (though they were to care for the alien).
If laws were broken – even unintentionally – sacrifices were required;
Contamination and disease were to be carefully cleansed;
Unholy conduct would turn God's blessings into curses. Each year a
Scapegoat was led to a desolate place, to bear away the people's sins.

Numbers

Naming and counting Israel's tribes was in God's plan for the promised land. Unless the people obeyed God's laws they would remain in the wilderness. **Moses faced rebellions: only Caleb and Joshua believed Canaan could be entered.**

Balaam the prophet was prevented from cursing Israel by his donkey. Even though food came from Heaven and water gushed from rocks, the people

Repeatedly rebelled. Israel was decimated after being seduced by Moab, so a Second census was needed before Canaan's lands could be allocated to tribes.

Deuteronomy

Disobeying God's command to take possession of the promised land, Even though their spies had found it fertile, the people remained fearful. Unwilling to face the enemy they rebelled and turned back toward the desert, Therefore that generation, even Moses, was not allowed to cross the Jordan. Exhorting Israel to be obedient, Moses urged remembrance of the LORD's covenant,

Reminding them that no other nation had such righteous laws and decrees. O Israel! – fear the LORD, walk in His ways, serve Him with heart and soul; Never deprive the alien, the fatherless or widow of justice, nor neglect your tithes;

Observe the festivals, judge impartially, uproot detestable practices; choose life.

Moses set out blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience

Yet he could only gaze on Canaan from Mount Nebo, and he died in Moab.

REFLECTIONS I

Creation

An acrostic written for the World Day of Prayer a few years back, when the theme was *All God's Creation is Very Good* (Genesis 1:31)

Cosmos called out of infinite dark,
Restless void roused by wisdom's spark
Emergent shapes formed in deepest night
A piercing voice summoned primal light
The sun and moon obeyed its command
Infinite life teemed through water and land
On ground that had been mere dust, Adam stood.
Now, for a time, all was very good.

Rainbow

The rainbow symbol has been widely used in different contexts, but it has a particular meaning in the Bible as the sign of the covenant that God established with all life on the earth (Genesis 9:17) after the Great Flood.

Recalling an eternal promise, a covenant sign
Arched over the earth, God's valentine.
Ineffable light made visible in refraction,
Noah knew that it meant 'God in action'.
Being ever alongside us, the Ancient of Days
Occupies our hearts, inhabits our praise –
Wavelengths of God illumine our ways.

Angels

Whatever our view on angels, we have to admit there's a lot of them in the Bible, starting in Genesis, when Abraham is visited by the Angel of the Lord. They continue throughout the Old and New Testaments – and we may entertain them unawares (Hebrews 13:2).

Announcing glad tidings to God's chosen heirs
Never ceasing their praises, Heaven's glories are theirs
Guarding us, ministering, hearing our prayers
Emissaries of God in our worldly affairs
Leading us through life's darkest thoroughfares
Sometimes we entertain them unawares.

Remembrance

An acrostic written for Remembrance Sunday, but also as a more general reflection on the centrality of remembrance in the Bible. In particular, the children of Israel are repeatedly reminded to remember how God had delivered them from Pharaoh's armies as they crossed the Red Sea. (Exodus 15:1-21; Psalm 77:19-20; Deut 6:20-23; Joshua 24:5-7)

Recall, O Israel, your deliverance
Escaping Pharaoh's army, brought safe to shore;
Moses' song of triumph, Miriam's victory dance.
Each day a fiery pillar going before
Multitudes wandering in Sinai's expanse,
Becoming a special people under a perfect law.
'Remember' cries the psalmist, 'and cast a glance
At how God saved us in peace and war'.
Nations delivered from direst circumstance,
Captive souls plucked from Sheol's jaw,
El Shaddai, God of victory, God of the second chance.

Neighbour

Although we perhaps associate neighbourliness with the New Testament and especially the parable of the Good Samaritan, it has been an integral part of God's law since Canaan was settled and people had to live with neighbours. Fair treatment of foreigners in the land was inseparably linked to this (Leviticus 19: 18, 33). In Advent 2021, Tearfund ran an online "Advent Calendar" of daily reflections on the theme of neighbourliness, especially our global neighbours. Two of the contributors chose Romans 15:2 as their verse for reflection – *Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up.*)

Neither the priest nor the Levite any compassion showed
Even though a fellow Jew lay maimed across the road,
In time a Samaritan – not of their ilk – passed that way,
Gave comfort, dressed his wounds, found him a place to stay;
Hospitality prevailed over centuries of bad blood.
Build up your neighbour, please them for their own good –
Old or young, rich or poor, our turning worlds collide,
Unsung acts of kindness ensure trust is multiplied,
Roads must be crossed if need cries out from the other side.

Books of History, Poetry and Wisdom

The ‘history’ books cover the period from Israel’s conquest of Canaan (‘the promised land’), their occupation of this territory under a succession of judges and kings, followed by their defeat and deportation into slavery, and finally their return to rebuild Jerusalem. These books are followed by a small number of poetry and wisdom books, most famously Psalms. I have placed them together in this collection because much of the poetry and wisdom was written by two kings in particular – David and Solomon. Also, for some reason, my acrostics never seem to have been based directly on the history books!

Joshua

Jordan’s waters were stemmed and Jericho’s wall tumbled
Over as Joshua’s armies swept across the promised land;
Southern cities fell and northern kings conceded defeat;
Hebron was given to Caleb and the lands allotted to tribes.
United, all Israel assembled to echo Joshua’s vow –
As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

Judges

Joshua died, and the following generation forgot the Lord.
Unlike other nations, Israel had no king; instead, God raised judges,
Delivering them from their foes. Deborah defeated the Canaanites;
Gideon, the Midianites; Jephthah, the Ammonites; Samson, the Philistines.
Every time, though, they reverted to idol worship and wicked ways:
Surely a lapsed nation, everyone just doing what was right in their own eyes.

Ruth

Returning from Moab with her widowed daughters-in-law, widowed Naomi
Urged them to stay in their homeland. But one, Ruth, clung to her, and
Touched the heart of Boaz in whose fields she gleaned. They married,
Had a son Obed, who fathered Jesse, who fathered King David.

*As noted earlier, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles are so good they
named them twice! I've taken two bites of the cherry at Samuel and
Kings because I need as many letters as possible to cover the key
events. I have only made one entry for Chronicles because it gives me
ten letters and repeats a lot of ground previously covered.*

1 Samuel

Shiloh's temple was where childless Hannah prayed for a son
And where her firstborn, Samuel, heard God calling in the night:
Mightily he led Israel, but they demanded a king and he anointed Saul.
Upset at Saul's sins, Samuel perceived that God had now chosen David
Even tho' he was the youngest of Jesse's sons. Saul sought David's life, yet
Lost his own, along with his sons, fighting the Philistines.

2 Samuel

Saul's death left a power vacuum – David reigned in Judah;
Abner (Saul's army chief) installed Ish-bosheth over Israel.
Many battles later, David brought unity and returned the ark to Jerusalem.
Uriah's beautiful wife, Bathsheba, was David's downfall, and thence
Everything turned to treachery and secession before re-unification.
Loyal man of God, David was flawed yet great, Israel's singer of songs.

1 Kings

**Knowledge and wisdom should have defined Solomon's reign –
Instead, he strayed after the pagan gods of his many wives.
No stopping the rot now: the nation divided and kings forsook the Lord.
Gilead's Elijah sent Baal's prophets packing at Mount Carmel, but
Still Ahab, Jezebel and Ahaziah continued to sin grievously.**

2 Kings

**Keeping the prophetic line, Elijah passed his mantle to Elisha;
Isaiah came later, but still the people continued to worship idols;
Nefarious kings shed innocent blood, and God withdrew his protection.
Good king Josiah's reforms proved too little, too late
So the people were taken captive – Israel to Assyria, Judah to Babylon.**

1 & 2 Chronicles

**Consider a nation's remembrance of its identity:
Histories of tribes and clans and their land allotments,
Records of priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, musicians,
Overseers, treasurers, army commanders and, of course, kings.
Not willing to risk Philistine capture, Saul fell on his sword;
Israel then crowned David, popular victor, ark-returner, flawed but faithful.
Celebrate Solomon's wisdom, temple and prayers, but rue his backsliding;
Learn of the wars and divisions consequent on successive kings' sins;
Examine how reforms by Asa, Hezekiah, Uzziah and Josiah brought peace;
See how sin led to enslavement, leaving the land to recover for seventy years.**

Ezra

**Exiled, the people of Judah were allowed by King Cyrus to return to their
homeland;
Zion lay desolate so the re-settlers rebuilt the altar and the temple;
Royal decree authorised the work to continue after it had been thwarted by
opponents;
Artaxerxes resourced its completion, whilst Ezra led a repentance of the
people.**

Nehemiah

Not only was Jerusalem's temple in ruins, but also its wall and gates.
Exiles sent a message of distress to Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.
His face was sad as he approached the King, but the King was gracious,
Expressing concern that he should return to restore Jerusalem's defences.
Many resources were availed to Nehemiah and many men supported him.
In the face of opposition, he provided armed guards for the builders.
After the works were completed, he proclaimed the law and celebrated.
He became governor and sought God's favour for his many reforms.

Esther

Enraged when Queen Vashti snubbed his lavish party, King Xerxes
Selected beautiful Esther, adopted daughter of Mordecai, as his new queen.
The king's advisor, Haman, sought the life of Mordecai and his fellow Jews.
Have you become queen for such a time as this? Mordecai asked his ward;
Esther persuaded Xerxes to reverse the decree and execute Haman instead.
Rescued from genocide, the exultant Jews instituted the festival of Purim.

Job

Justice seemed in short supply when virtuous Job met the direst misfortunes,
Ostiose friends at first comforted him, then judged him as self-righteous
But when God showed up, Job learned that redemption lay in worship and
surrender.

Psalms

Praise and adoration for God's righteousness and goodness;
Singing, rejoicing and thanksgiving for what God has done;
Asking for guidance on living a life of Godly wisdom;
Laments for times of crisis, grief and suffering;
Mercy and restoration sought for sins committed;
Supplication for our needs, desires, healing and wholeness.

Proverbs

Prudence, insight, instruction, discernment,
Righteousness and justice are proclaimed by Lady Wisdom.
Oppression, sloth, adultery, vanity – like a dog returning to its
Vomit – are the ways of Dame Folly.
Exemplary behaviour, fairness and a heart for the poor
Reveal the wise person and will lead to honour.
Bear with the strange culture and didactic style of Proverbs:
Search these sayings and you will encounter the mind of God.

Ecclesiastes

Everything is meaningless, proclaims the preacher –
Chasing the wind is how we spend our time on earth.
Cultivating knowledge, seeking pleasure, gaining wealth
Lead equally to the same fate for all, both good and bad.
Eat, drink and find satisfaction in labour all your days,
Seasons come round for every activity under heaven;
In truth, we will not understand what happens “under the sun”.
As a man comes so he departs, and in the end gains nothing,
Seek wisdom, cast your bread upon the waters,
Turn away from evil, value friends and family.
Eternal mysteries are beyond us and are known only to God
So fear God and keep his commandments: this is our whole duty.

Song of Songs

See how the beloved yearns for her lover;
O daughters of Jerusalem, rejoice and delight in this couple.
Nightly she searched the city and finally found him –
Glancing at him, she stole his heart.

Over her he spread a banner, his banner of love.
Friends of the bride and groom,

See the beloved and her lover
Overwhelmed with passion one for another.
No ordinary love story is this, but
God yearning for his beloved Israel,
Shepherd and flock trysting in the garden.

REFLECTIONS II

Psalm

Whether you feel like rejoicing, crying or venting your anger, the psalmists have already been there before you.

Praising, sing out when you've blessings to spare;
Sorrowing, cry out from the depths of despair;
Angry, storm Heaven when nothing seems fair;
Life can be carefree or too much to bear;
Mourning or laughing, the psalmist speaks your prayer.

Selah

Selah is a term seen in the Psalms which was probably a musical instruction to pause and reflect. If you have been praying and praising, don't be too quick to rush away.

Still yourself: can you hear the beating of God's heart?
Even Jesus cherished time to be apart;
Learning to press life's pause button is a vital art,
As when Martha's sister chose the better part.
Heaven's symphonies are pianissimo when they start.

Songs of Praise

The Psalms in particular remind us of the importance of song and music, and singing favourite hymns is an important reason why many people attend church. However, hymns are more than just a good sing, because God inhabits the praise of his people (Psalm 22:3).

Soprano, alto, tenor, bass
Offer thanks to the God of Grace
New hymns, old hymns, anthems raise
Gospel songs and ancient lays –
Sing a sacrifice of praise.

Organs, praise bands, harmonise;
Fanfares echo to the skies!

Powers of darkness: feel despair,
Recoil as worship fills the air! –
Aware that Heaven's victorious King
Inhabits the very words we sing.
So saints on earth lift up your voice,
Even the hills and trees rejoice!

Suffering

The book of Job fascinates me because it is the oldest in the Bible yet asks the deepest of questions – how can a just God let good people suffer? It comes up with an answer that has never been bettered – we only see a partial picture and we must trust in a God who sees the full picture. I imagine a narrator sitting by a tribal encampment, telling this story and raising questions that are as old as the idea of God itself. Christians are not spared heartache and difficult times, but we have a God who shared (and still shares) directly in human suffering.

Say it! Rant at God. Tell Him you're mad.
Unleash the anger you didn't know you had.
Faith should help, but now it's hanging by a thread;
Friends speak clumsy words that are easier left unsaid.
Empty. Bereft. Scared by a diagnosis.
Raw emotion lets guilt seep in by osmosis.
In a heartbeat, your known world turns to dross.
No-one feels your pain or comprehends your loss.
God only knows! He went through it on the cross.

A Time To Embrace

The book of Ecclesiastes has a famous passage known as *A Time for Everything* ('To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven'). It contains one verse that always used to puzzle me – 'A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing' (Ecclesiastes 3:5) – until Covid-19 struck! This acrostic was written in the summer of 2021, when we were officially allowed hugs once more. It reminded us of the importance of human touch.

At first we thought it would not last very long,
This 'new normal' of elbow-bumps – we were wrong.
It became a time for us to refrain from embracing,
Mouthing our kisses from a two-metre spacing.
Encountering friends, we stopped short and withdrew,
Touching became a luxury, hugs became taboo.
Old folk close to death could not understand
Eye-moist loved ones who would not hold their hand,
Masks covered lips that craved a final kiss –
Bidding last farewells was never meant to be like this.
Relatives and friends severed by borders and oceans
Awaited a chance to share long-suppressed emotions.
Covid's grip is loosening: soon we'll re-discover touch,
Embracing friends and family we've missed so very much.

A Strong Tower

“The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe” (Proverbs 18:10). Written when our church tower was needing urgent (and expensive) repairs.

Architects tell us our tower needs repair

Sandstone erodes, grout crumbles, timbers wear

Time takes its toll on brickwork and mortar

Rafters and beams suffer ingress of water.

Once our tower was weatherproof, undecayed;

Now it needs restoration, its structure made

Good once more to withstand the salt-wind’s scour.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower

Offering the righteous a sure salvation

Within an impregnable fortification.

Earth’s proud towers always need to be restored

Rock solid hope rests on the name of the Lord.

Books of Prophecy

Isaiah

In the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw a vision of God
Send me, he said, and he prophesied to Israel and to her enemies.
A virgin will bear a son as a sign of God's judgement and favour,
Israel will suffer for her sins but be restored, and her enemies subdued:
Arise, shine! God will lead you in safety and will send His Holy One:
He will be despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

Jeremiah

Judgement would fall on God's chosen people because of their faithlessness:
Evil practices and false prophets had brought the nation low,
Reigned by stiff-necked kings, Judah was about to fall to Babylon.
Egypt looked like a safe haven but was a fickle and idolatrous ally.
Mercy is on offer from God in return for repentance, Jeremiah prophesied;
Instead, they threw him in a well, burned his writings and plotted his death.
Accept Babylonian rule and God will ultimately redeem you, he counselled,
However they fought Babylon, Jerusalem was sacked, and they were led
captive.

Lamentations

Look upon the deserted city and wail over her distress
All the splendour has departed from the daughter of Zion
Mourn for her exiled youths and maidens, her starving priests and elders:
Enemies gloat over her, her prophets are exposed as false and worthless,
Nothing and no-one has escaped God's anger.
The prophet (Jeremiah) bemoans his disgrace
And yet he knows the Lord's compassions never fail
They are new every morning, and great is his faithfulness
I will say to myself the Lord is my portion, I will wait for Him.
Once worth their weight in gold, the precious sons of Zion are like clay.
Needful of restoration, Jeremiah pleads with God, saying
Save us, unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry beyond measure.

Ezekiel

Eagle, lion, ox and man – manifestation of God calling Ezekiel to be watchman-prophet.

Zion would be punished for her sins and the glory would depart from her temple;

Each would be judged for their own deeds and could not blame their forebears;

Kingdoms would fall – first, idolatrous Israel, then her arrogant neighbours.

Israel, long exiled, would be revived like a valley of dry bones receiving flesh and breath;

Elevated miraculously, Ezekiel gazed on a rebuilt temple to which God's glory returned,

Living waters flowed from it, as lands were restored to the tribes of Israel.

Daniel

Dreams tormented Babylon's rulers during the years they held Judah captive, Astrologers from their own courts were unable to interpret these strange visions,

Nebuchadnezzar and his successor Belshazzar turned to Daniel for explanations:

In God's power, he explained a statue with feet of clay and writing on the wall.

Envious of Daniel, Babylonian governors provoked Darius to throw him in a lions' den.

Later, Daniel dreamed of end-times, the rise and fall of kingdoms, and of God's Anointed.

Hosea

Hearing the Lord's command, Hosea took an adulterous wife

Only to love her, as God loved Israel, despite her infidelity.

Sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind, Israel lusted after false Gods:

Ephraim, so unfaithful, might once again sow righteousness

And reap the fruit of God's unfailing love.

Joel

Judah, facing God's wrath for her sins, is laid waste by swarms of locusts,
Omen of armies sweeping from the north to conquer and debase her,
Except if the people repent, so the Lord may pour out his spirit and blessing:
Let the weak say *I am strong*, dream dreams, see visions, reclaim the land.

Amos

A humble shepherd, Amos had a prophetic vision of God's anger for Israel
Many were her sins of violence, injustice, idolatry and complacency
Only if justice and righteousness flowed like rivers would God show mercy
Sin would bring destruction, yet a remnant would live and ruins be restored.

Obadiah

Obstinate Edom, the Sovereign Lord will debase and destroy you
Because of your violence and contempt towards your brother Jacob,
Allies and friends will deceive and desert you,
Destruction awaits you – for you gloated over Judah's misfortune.
Israelite exiles in Canaan will occupy your land
And exiles from Jerusalem will possess the towns,
Holiness will return to Zion and the kingdom will be the Lord's.

Jonah

Joppa, a good port to sail west and defy God's call to head east to Nineveh:
Overboard the crew threw Jonah as his disobedience caused a raging storm.
Next, a great fish swallowed him, spewing him on the shore after three days.
And so Jonah went to Nineveh, told that sinful city to repent, which they did.
However, God didn't punish them, and Jonah slowly grasped the wideness of
His mercy.

Micah

Mountains will melt as God, in His fury, strips Israel of her blessings;
In the last days, though, the mountain of the LORD's temple will be restored;
Coming from Bethlehem will be a ruler over Israel, of ancient origin.
Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly with God and you will be forgiven;
Humbled for a season, Israel will rise, and her enemies will fear the LORD.

Nahum

Nineveh's cruelty and wickedness have provoked the LORD's wrath –
Anger which afflicts the guilty with whirlwind, earthquake, fire and drought.
Healing is impossible, for Nineveh's injury is fatal and her friends fickle.
Until now she has enslaved Israel, but the LORD is a refuge: His
Messenger will arrive and will restore the splendour of Judah.

Habakkuk

How long, O LORD, must I cry for help?
AnsWER me, why do you tolerate treachery?
Be patient – though it linger, judgement will come.
As the waters cover the sea, so will
Knowledge of the glory of the LORD fill the earth;
KeeP silence, O Creation, for the LORD is in his holy temple.
Undeterred – even when crops fail and livestock are barren
Know that I will still rejoice in the LORD and be joyful.

Zephaniah

Zeal for righteousness consumes the LORD
Everything will be swept away from earth, air and sea
Punishment will befall the idolatrous and complacent
Houses will fall and vineyards wither on the great day of the LORD.
Against proud Philistia, and insolent Moab and Ammon, He will rise;
Nineveh will be left desolate, Cush will fall by the sword;
Israel, arrogant and profane, will find her streets deserted.
A faithful remnant will be gathered to a safe, secure Jerusalem;
Humble and meek, living in peace, their fortunes will be restored.

Haggai

High priest Joshua and governor Zerubbabel, listen up!
A prophecy has come to Haggai telling you to restore the temple:
God sees you living in plush houses while His house remains a ruin.
Gather the remnant of the people in Judah (this was during the exile)
And rebuild the temple, so that you may prosper and be blessed;
In peace you shall live and Zerubbabel will be as God's signet ring.

Zechariah

Zion will be restored by the LORD's mercy, spoke an angel to the prophet –
Even though ruinous, God will stretch out a measuring line and rebuild it.
Coming through strange visions, the LORD showed Zechariah many things:
Horns of proud nations, a crown and clean garments for the High Priest,
A stone with eyes, a gold lampstand, a flying scroll, a woman in a basket,
Running oil from two olive trees, chariots. What did these mean? –
Israel's enemies being defeated, evil driven out, a remnant returning:
And not by might, nor by power, but by the spirit of the LORD Almighty.
Hope would come through a king, righteous, gentle and riding on a donkey.

Malachi

Maimed animals and defiled food are what you sacrifice to the LORD;

An awesome God deserves awe, but you defile His table;

Levi's priesthood has caused you to stumble with false teaching.

Almighty God will return to the temple like a refiner's fire, so repent:

Come with your full tithe, that you may be in the Book of Remembrance.

His chosen one will rise like the sun of righteousness with healing in his wings –

I will send Elijah to prepare the way before that great and dreadful day.

REFLECTIONS III

New Every Morning

The book of Lamentations is an unlikely place to find a couplet of the most inspiring verses from the Bible. It is a book about Jeremiah (the wailing prophet) lamenting the sack of Jerusalem by Babylon's army. However, even in the midst of desolation he declares that God will not fail his people, but will stay with them and bring them hope: *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness* (Lamentations 3:22-23). Christians can suffer low mood and depression; there is no quick fix, but God carries us through tough times more than we realise.

Night falls. For some, it's very dark.
Evening's stars hunker down behind cloud;
Where lamps glowed, now there's barely a spark.

Empty hearts break, black-dog heads are bowed.
Very faintly on the breeze someone chants a prayer,
Echoing its hope somebody lights a candle –
Risible weapons against a world's despair
Yet still too hot for Hell's hordes to handle.

Moonlight still dances behind its shroud
Oceans still yield their gentle luminescence
Rims of silver trim each nimbus cloud –
Nocturnal sentinels of a numinous presence.
In a few short hours the boundless day will dawn
New promises will comfort those who mourn
God's mercies are, with each fresh sun, re-born.

Prophets

Prophets are not just famous dead men that you read about in the Old Testament. Sometimes ordinary Christians have to speak out prophetically...

Prophets are messengers who
Respond to God's warning word,
Old or in their youth.
Prophets bid their comfort zone farewell,
Holding fast to what they heard
Even if they must tell
The most inconvenient truth.
Sometimes it has to be you!

THE NEW TESTAMENT

At the end of the Old Testament, Malachi prophesies that before the Sun of Righteousness appears, Elijah will arrive to prepare the way. At the start of the New Testament, following the account of Jesus' birth and childhood, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness to preach a message of repentance ahead of the arrival of the Messiah. Although John claims not to be Elijah, Jesus makes it clear that, in fact, he is (Matthew 11:14). Although four hundred years lie between these events, they appear seamless.

The New Testament starts with the Gospels – accounts of the life, teaching and works of Jesus and his disciples. The first three are 'synoptic' and consist mainly of factual overviews; the last (John) takes a more cosmic view of Jesus and offers a number of 'signs' which reveal who he truly was. Unfortunately, in three cases it is only possible to write a four-line acrostic, so it's best to read at least one gospel in its entirety to get a fuller picture. Each gospel is distinctive and I have tried, however briefly, to capture its essence.

The subsequent books give an insight into the Early Church, starting with a historical account of how the apostles continued after the ascension of Jesus, especially how the faith was extended to gentiles after the pharisee Saul became a believer, re-named Paul. This is followed by a number of instructive letters to early churches and pastoral letters to individuals, many of them written by Paul. As with Chronicles in the Old Testament, where more than one letter has been written to a church or to/by an individual, I have just written one acrostic. The bible concludes with a prophetic revelation to John, including messages to seven of the early churches, apocalyptic visions of the end times, and assurances to persecuted Christians that God is in ultimate control.

The Gospels

Matthew

Many flocked to John the Baptist (who was in fact 'Elijah'), by the Jordan,
And when Jesus was baptised the Spirit descended on him like a dove.
Tempted for forty days in the wilderness, Jesus resisted Satan and began His
ministry.
Then He chose twelve disciples, preached the Sermon on the Mount, taught
about prayer,
Healed many, spoke in parables, warned of judgement and boldly entered
Jerusalem.
Eventually the authorities bribed Judas to betray Him after a last supper with
the disciples.
Walking the way of the cross, He rose from the grave and commissioned his
followers.

Mark

Minimum detail, but maximum urgency, Mark tells a gripping account of
how Jesus:
Appoints disciples, heals many, forgives sins, teaches in parables,
Refutes legalistic doctrine, commands the weather, is betrayed by a kiss.
King of the Jews was the ironic inscription above his thorn-crowned head.

Luke

Light of the World, announced by Gabriel; Mary's soul magnified the
LORD.
Unsettling traditions, Jesus ate with sinners, exalted the lowly, humbled the
vain;
Kingdom values broke out wherever He went, culminating on the cross.
Emmaus-bound, the risen Lord explained to two travellers all that had
happened.

John

Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, inextinguishable light

Only begotten son of God, preparing a room for us in Heaven

He is the door, the bread of life, the good shepherd, the resurrection

**No-one comes to the Father except by Jesus – the way, the truth, the
life.**

REFLECTIONS IV

We might expect the gospels to start with the triumphant and imperial entry of a warrior-king, but instead Jesus arrives as a vulnerable baby. Here are two acrostics about the birth of Jesus, and one about the 'epiphany' (the arrival of gift-bearing wise men when Jesus was a toddler), i.e. the 'revelation' of Jesus to Gentiles.

Bethlehem

Business booms for innkeepers – this census of population
Emperor Augustus ordered has got the whole nation
Travelling, each family to their native city.
Hostels are crammed, inns full, there's little pity
Lost on two stragglers, the girl pregnant, needing a bed.
Eventually there's a hovel where she can rest her head;
Hoping for warmth, they find a chill stable instead.
Each huddles the other; they'd almost caught their death.
Mary gasps in labour – and angels hold their breath.

Christmas

Cold, fragile and aching, this carpenter's wife
Held her defenceless newborn fearfully;
Responsible now for his every pulse of life,
Isolated from kinswomen, intuitively and tearfully
She somehow kept him warm and fed,
Tried settling him in a makeshift bed:
Motherhood was harsh on this young slip, barely wed.
And then, bearing awestruck certainties, sent to reassure,
Shepherds came rattling at the stable door.

Epiphany

Eastern magi crossed hills and deserts to seek a king,
Princes in their own realms, they brought a royal offering;
In distant Judaea they knew God would reveal his face,
Prophecy and star now combined to fix time and place.
Herod sought a death – to him, God’s new thing posed a threat,
Although the magi sought a revelation and became wiser yet.
Not all who see the Christ-child will accept him in their heart:
You must personally encounter his gift of a fresh start.

Many people lived in expectation of a promised Messiah who would liberate Israel from Roman occupation. John the Baptist, who had a powerful following amongst ordinary people, announced that ‘one greater than he’ would soon appear. He would not usher in an easy life, but would bring judgement and reckoning. Nowadays, we treat the period of Advent (the month before Christmas) as period of reflection on John’s solemn message.

Advent

After the old-style prophets had long gone,
Desert-dwelling, locust-eating, hair-clad John
Vented his venom on viperous visitors,
Excoriated extortioners, faced down inquisitors:
Now was the time to flee from the fire,
To bear fruit of repentance for the promised Messiah.

After Jesus had been baptised by John, he went into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the devil and to prepare for his earthly ministry. We remember this as another period of solemn reflection – Lent – which precedes Easter in the church calendar.

Lent

Love led Him to inhabit that wilderness of thirst
Empowered by the Spirit as Satan did his worst.
Now is the time to reaffirm our accord
To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord.

Jesus then began to gather disciples to support him in his ministry. As Christians, we cannot stand still, but must become modern-day disciples prepared to follow where Jesus calls, and to give each other mutual support. This is an acrostic written for our church's year of discipleship.

Disciple

Dare we risk opening up, sharing,
Intent on being mutually caring
Sisters and brothers – not fairweather
Christians, but friends growing together?
Inquiring, going deeper, seeking God's will,
Praying, listening, then going deeper still
Learning what it means to be salt and leaven
Engaging with Jesus twentyfour-seven.

Prayer

The disciples asked Jesus how to pray. Perhaps they expected him to provide a formula for complex theological intercessions: instead, he gave them a simple family prayer which distilled the essence of the Kingdom (Matthew 6:5-15). Sometimes, carefully crafted intercessory prayers are appropriate, but too often we fall into the trap of thinking our prayers need to be long and complicated. This acrostic was inspired by some people in our church who have an easy, natural and implicitly trusting way of speaking to God.

Perhaps, more often, we should just listen, be still,
Receiving God's guidance, expecting to be blessed
Accepting that God knows our needs and is eager to fulfil.
Yet when we do speak, God heeds even the simplest request –
Each childlike prayer is heard, for the prayer warrior's skill
Rests in honest everyday words, not just our Sunday best.

The next acrostics reflect on some of the many parables that Jesus told.

Treasure

In the Bible, some people have to sell or give up everything in order to find treasure (e.g. Matthew 13:44)

The Kingdom of Heaven is like
Rare treasure hidden in a field:
Even if it costs everything, you may strike
A vein where pure gold is concealed.
Seek treasure that is safe from moth and rust
Ultimately, it is worth the endeavour.
Riches and wealth will end up as dust
Easter's cache holds its value forever.

Sparrow

Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29,31)

Scratching amongst stubble after the gleaning
Provisioned by God, the sparrow finds grain,
Anxious for nothing, it's pecking and preening,
Roosting and resting then flying again.
Restless people, when God's intervening
Open your heart, offload your pain –
Wealthy is the life to which Jesus gives meaning.

Widow's Mite

The poor have a central importance in the Christian faith: Jesus chose marginal people to take their place in history (Mark 12:41–44, Luke 21:1–4).

Why do we remember her, this solitary figure?
Is it because we see her as part of something bigger?
Destitute and stooped, at the margins of society,
Overshadowed by powerbrokers' fake shows of piety,
Waiting on God, she unburdened her cares,
She had no need of fine robes or long prayers.

Many are the honours the rich receive on earth –
In cash and property we calculate their worth.
The marginalised, the displaced, the humble, the least,
End up being invited to Heaven's feast.

Shepherd

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.
Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

Sheep are wayward creatures, always wandering astray
Humankind is much the same, it's in our DNA;
Ever envying, ever hankering after greener
Pastures – discontent is part of our demeanour.
Hirelings cannot save us, they'll quickly run amok
Every time a ravening wolf threatens the flock.
Remember Jesus is The Gate, for both Gentile and Jew:
Didn't he leave the ninety-nine, just to search for you?

The Gospels culminate with the trial and crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Palm Sunday

People pack the streets to hail their Messiah
Adversaries keep their distance, out of the way,
Lying in the wings they plot and conspire,
Mobs are fickle, not too difficult to sway.
Scattered with palms, the way is strewed,
Upon the colt of an ass, Jesus prays yet grieves.
Now Israel divides, leaders collude,
Daringly, Joseph of Arimathea believes.
A judgement awaits you, you vipers' brood,
You who made the temple a den of thieves.

Maundy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper, when Jesus gave his disciples a mandate – Mandatum – to love each other and share bread and wine. This acrostic is written as if addressed to the disciples.

Meeting for Passover one final time,
A sacrifice awaiting a traitor's crime,
Upstairs, far from the madding crowd,
Night wrapped you tight in its ink black shroud.
Dipping your *matzah* in the blood red wine
You became quick branches in the Saviour's vine.

Take, eat of my body, drink of my blood
He commanded. How little you understood;
Uneasily, you let him wash your feet.
Remembrance, from now, would be bittersweet –
Suffering in joy, receiving in giving,
Death to self as a new way of living.
A final command, ever old and ever new –
You were to love one another as He had loved you.

Good Friday

Golgotha was a wretched place that day.
One passer-by had helped Him bear the cross,
Others had succoured Him on the way,
Despairing their victory had turned to loss.
Flogged, mocked, spat upon, betrayed
Rejected, stripped, despised, disowned thrice –
In between thieves he hung. One, unafraid,
Deprecated Him for His futile sacrifice,
And the other, penitent, with whom Jesus prayed –
You shall be with me this day in Paradise.

Easter

Even though the cross had staunched His breath,
And the tomb had set its seal on brutal death,
Sins of men yet stung in wounds still fresh,
The word no longer dwelt with us as flesh –
Even these could not prolong that darkest night.
Resurrected life kindled the world alight.

Doubting Thomas

This was a difficult acrostic to compose but I felt it worth the struggle, because there's a bit of 'Doubting Thomas' in us all. Actually, Thomas (also called Didymus) was a powerful disciple who, according to tradition, took Christianity eastwards towards India.

Didymus, the twin, was not in the room
On the Sunday of the empty tomb.
Unless he witnessed flank and limb
Believing wasn't an option for him.
Then the Lord returned, dispelling doubt:
In front of all, He pointed out
Nailmarks and the spear's
Gash, recalling God-forsaken tears.
Thomas rarely grasped things first time round –
His doubt was real, his faith profound.
Overwhelmed, humbled he confessed
My Lord and My God – and then was blessed.
And the twin became a saint of steel:
Sincere doubts oft make faith more real.

Luke's gospel includes an account of two travellers walking along the road to Emmaus, who unwittingly walked and talked with the risen Christ (Luke 24:13-35). When they finally realised the identity of their companion, they said "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Emmaus Road

Every Sabbath they'd heard the age-old story
Many times the rabbi had read from Isaiah
Maybe this year, with great pomp and furore
Armies would arise, led by the Messiah.
Unwary, on the road, they encountered dirty glory
Suddenly the travellers' hearts were afire.

Religious routine rarely reaps reward,
Only through relationship can our walk begin
And when you first encountered the risen Lord
Didn't your heart strangely burn within?

The Early Church

Acts of the Apostles

After Jesus had ascended, the apostles stayed in Jerusalem,
Chose Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot who had taken his life.
Tongues of fire descended as they prayed on the day of Pentecost;
Speaking ecstatically, they realised the Holy Spirit had been poured out.

Onlookers thought they were drunk but Peter explained everything;
Fearing God, thousands believed, joined them, and the Church was born.

Then the apostles preached, sold their wealth and performed miracles;
Hauled before the temple authorities they were jailed and flogged;
Enraged, the temple leaders stoned Stephen – the first Christian martyr.

A Pharisee called Saul approved of this killing and set off to Damascus
Persecuting the church, but on his way was blinded by a vision of Jesus.
Once he regained his sight, he became an apostle, re-named as Paul.
Setting off from Antioch, Paul led three missionary journeys,
Teaching and planting churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece,
Living a dangerous life to proclaim that Jesus was the promised Messiah.
Eventually he was arrested on trumped-up charges and sent to Rome;
Shipwrecked on Malta, he ministered before continuing to his trial.

Romans

Righteousness is reckoned to us (as it was to Abraham) by faith alone;
Observation of the law, by itself, is worthless because everyone falls short;
More than conquerors, both Jew and Gentile can defeat sin through God's
grace;

Abba Father we both cry, for the Holy Spirit makes us co-heirs with Christ;
No longer are we under condemnation and nothing can separate us from
God's love.

Sacrifice your lives as a Godly offering, and overcome evil with good.

1 & 2 Corinthians

Church divided – by doctrine, disputes and disreputable behaviour,
Only some salutary letters from Paul succeeded in setting them straight –
Right ways of settling disputes, showing restraint, conducting worship,
Inspired use of spiritual gifts to build up the church into a single body,
Never failing to love with kindness, forgiveness and perseverance,
Trusting in the resurrection and looking beyond the grave to imperishability,
Hardships borne for the treasure and hope stored in our bodily ‘jars of clay’,
In an unveiled face-to-face relationship with God, reconciled to Christ,
A new creation, repentant and forgiving, living by faith and not by sight,
Not grudging in generosity and eager to support the wider church with gifts,
Shunning false ‘super-apostles’ and sharing in the suffering of true apostles.

Galatians

Gullible people! – being led astray by preachers of a different gospel
After I (Paul) had confronted Peter over the very same hypocrisy:
Live by faith alone, and ignore preachers who tell you to adopt Jewish laws.
Abraham had faith in God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness;
True heirs of Abraham become righteous by faith, not by lifeless laws.
In Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female –
All are God’s children, and His Spirit makes us cry out *Abba Father*.
Now use your freedom, not for sin, but to yield fruit of the Spirit:
Self-control, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness.

Ephesians

Experience God’s grace – you were dead in sin but are now alive in Christ.
Peace should abound in you, for there is one faith, one baptism, one Lord:
He himself is our peace, destroying the barrier between Jew and gentile.
Eradicate the deeds of darkness in your midst and be children of light,
Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ
In your families and well as in the church.
Against the spiritual forces of evil, put on the full armour of God,
Namely the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness and helmet of
Salvation; shield yourself with faith and pray in the Spirit constantly.

Philippians

Prisoner behind bars, Paul writes to reassure the church at Philippi;
Happen what may, his privations would help to advance the gospel.
In everything, he rejoiced over the Philippians and prayed they might:
Live a life worthy of the gospel, stand firm fearlessly,
Imitate Christ's humility and look to the interests of others,
Press on towards the goal of the prize awaiting in Heaven,
Purify their lives like stars in the sky among a crooked generation,
In every situation, by prayer and petition, present requests to God,
Ask for God's peace which passes all understanding, and seek to be
Noble and admirable and true and right and pure in every thought,
Supporting others, just as they had aided Paul in his hour of need.

Colossians

Continually praying for you, we ask God to fill you with the Spirit's wisdom;
Once you were alienated from God, but now are without blemish in his sight.
Lord Jesus, in whom you are reconciled, is the image of the invisible God;
Over all creation, he is the firstborn and in him all things were created,
Supreme over everything and in whom all heaven and earth hold together.
Since you have been raised with Christ, focus on things above;
Ignore legalists who judge you by what you eat or drink
And put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature.
Newness of life entails compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience:
So praise God gratefully with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

1 & 2 Thessalonians

The Lord's message rang true from the church in Thessalonica,
Hallmark of a gospel received not just with words but also with power.
Ever since first hearing the gospel, they had imitated the churches in Judea,
Sharing in their trials and persecutions.

Suggestions that their faith was under attack had reached the apostles
And Paul was relieved when Timothy sent report of their steadfast love.
Longing to see them again, Paul wrote, urging them to love one another,
Observe a quiet life, and pray, rejoice and give thanks continually.
Nevertheless, the church would have to be vigilant:

Idle and disruptive individuals were failing to pull their weight
And some were spreading false teaching about the day of the Lord,
Needing to be reminded that they had been among the firstfruits,
Saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

1 & 2 Timothy

Teach with diligence and trustworthiness, despite your youth;
Intercede for all in authority and ensure church leaders are beyond reproach;
Money – or at least the love of it – is the root of evil and leads many astray;
Oppose hypocrisy, false doctrine, idle gossip and quarrelsome teachers;
Terrible times will come, but fight the good fight and keep the faith;
Heed all Scripture, for it is God-breathed and in every way useful.
Young Timothy, help old Paul, for he is feeling weak and abandoned.

Titus

To Titus, the leader of the church in Crete –
Instruct the elders so that they may set a blameless example,
Teach sound doctrine and rebuke those who perpetuate myths,
Uphold reverent conduct in families and towards authorities.
Saved by grace, you must avoid foolish arguments about Jewish rules.

Philemon

Paul, now very old, imprisoned and chained, writes to Philemon:
Help has reached him in the form of Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave.
Instead of being angry with Onesimus, Paul prays for leniency;
Loth to instruct Philemon to forgive Onesimus, Paul appeals to his faith,
Even offering to recompense any debt or default Onesimus owes.
Moreover, Paul hopes to be freed and asks Philemon to prepare a guest room.
Onesimus' escapade gives us a poignant and personal insight into
Networks of support, prayer, worship and collaboration in the early church.

Hebrews

Heir of all things, radiance of God's glory and exact representation of Him,
Excelling the angels – Jesus has latterly spoken God's message to us.
Becoming fully human, He brought many sons and daughters to glory.
Receive rest and mercy from the great high priest of the new covenant;
Enter the most holy place through the curtain (that is, Jesus' body);
Whilst there is much we do not yet see, we keep confidence through faith;
Set your eyes upon Jesus, show hospitality, offer a sacrifice of praise.

James

Joy is what you should feel if your faith is tested, for you learn to persevere;
Act justly, show no favouritism, and let your faith be revealed through deeds;
Muzzle your tongue, which can corrupt the whole body with gossip and
boasting;
Earthly wisdom is selfish, so seek the wisdom that comes from heaven;
Sin, trouble and illness can be overcome by prayer, especially that of a
righteous person.

1 & 2 Peter

**Precious blood of Jesus, spotless lamb, has redeemed you as imperishable;
Empty yourselves of malice, love one another, glorify God among the world;
Trust in the Cornerstone, be a holy nation, royal priesthood, living sacrifice;
Everywhere, the devil prowls, so be on your guard against false teachers;
Realise that there will be a final judgement, but for now God is being patient.**

1, 2 & 3 John

**Jesus purifies us from sin, so we can walk in the light, without darkness.
Obey the command to walk in truth and love, for God makes us his children;
However, if we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father;
No-one who hates a brother or sister, or denies Christ, is walking in the light.**

Jude

**Jesus-deniers have already infiltrated your love feasts,
Ungodly people who boast and flatter, shepherds who feed only themselves –
Darkness and destruction await them. So persevere dear friends:
Eternal life is yours if you build up your faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.**

Revelation

**Revealed to John in exile, a message from Jesus for seven churches –
Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea –
Victory awaits their faithful, but suffering awaits their backsliders.
Enraptured in the Spirit, John looked through an open door into Heaven:
Living creatures sang, and elders bowed down, to one who sat on a throne
As he held a seven-sealed scroll which only the lamb was worthy to open.
Terrors erupted as the seals were broken – four horsemen unleashed turmoil
In heaven and earth until the beast and those bearing his mark were defeated.
Once the last judgement was over an angel led John to see the heavenly city,
New Jerusalem, home for those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life.**

REFLECTIONS V

The account of the early church begins with the disciples gathering in secret and selecting a successor to Judas Iscariot. They pray continually until, at the feast of Pentecost, they receive the Holy Spirit – the Comforter – as promised by Jesus. So significant is this event that it is considered to be the ‘birthday’ of the church, whilst The Acts of the Apostles is sometimes dubbed the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’. The following two acrostics are based on Acts, Chapter 2.

Pentecost

Praying, they chose Matthias to join the eleven;
Expecting, they awaited the Advocate from Heaven.
Nine in the morning, winds roared, fires blazed,
The disciples babbled like men who were crazed;
Eyewitnesses gathered together and stood amazed,
Citizens of many lands, each heard their own tongue spoken,
Over three thousand that day felt their proud hearts broken –
Spirit of truth, conviction and fire
Testified that Jesus truly was the Messiah.

Tongues of Fire

Twelve apostles gathered at an early hour
On Pentecost, to pray for heavenly power,
Nine in the morning they began to babble –
Galileans, sounding like a drunken rabble.
Utterly amazed, groups of bystanders heard
Ecstatic tongues. Many thought them absurd –
Some, though, understood every word.

Omens from Heaven, as Joel prophesied,
Fiery tongues settled on those inside.

“Fellow Jews”, Peter proclaimed, “be in no doubt,
In these days God’s Spirit is being poured out”.
Repentant, three thousand were baptised that day;
Ever growing, a new-born church was underway.

Wild Goose

In the Celtic church the wild goose – An Geadh-Glas – was a synonym for the Holy Spirit. Not only did the wild goose move in ways which (at that time) were a mystery, it also ‘disturbed and disrupted’. Be careful what you pray for – especially if you pray to be led by the Holy Spirit! (John 3:8; Romans 8:14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-13; Psalm 139:7)

Whither does the Holy Spirit blow?

It listeth wherever God pleases.

Loosen your moorings and let yourself go,

Dare trim your sail to Heaven’s breezes.

Give up control, risk setting a course

Over unknown seas, tracking wild geese –

Or else stay safe in port and gaze in remorse.

Spirit-led lives know both tempest and peace

Ever venturing, ever returning to source.

The letters of Paul, James, John and Peter, together with the anonymous writer of Hebrews, unpack key elements of Christian doctrine. The following acrostics cover some of the most important ones.

Grace

Our salvation flows from God’s grace alone (John 1:14-17; Romans 3:24; Romans 5:15; Ephesians 1:6-7).

Grafted in the vine, we become Yahweh’s kin

Ransomed by unmerited love, God’s spirit comes in

Absolved from guilt, we are cleansed within

Clemency, not judgement, breaks the grip of sin

Enveloped in God’s mercy, a new life can begin.

Cornerstone

The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes (Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; Ephesians 2:19-21; Romans 9:33).

Come all of you who set your trust
On treasure corrupted by moth and rust,
Reckoning your value by what you possess,
Needing ever more stuff as your key to success.
Examine yourself, ask what you are worth;
Riches don't lie in the mines of the earth.
Sands may shift, but one defence holds tight –
The lamb of God, the world's one true light
Our rock of ages, our secure foundation
Name above all names from the dawn of creation
Emmanuel, the firm hope of every nation.

Anchor

“We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll” (from Priscilla Jane Owens' hymn *Will your anchor hold in the storms of life*) (Hebrews 6:19).

Adrift, aimless, without compass or chart,
No balm for the soul, no hope in the heart.
Christ alone guarantees us safe haven,
His Father, alone, has on his hands graven
Our names – a steadfast, firm, secure,
Redemptive love bringing us safe ashore.

Righteousness

A difficult topic, but I believe that having righteousness reckoned to us is one of the most pivotal ideas in scripture (Job 32:1; Isaiah 33:15-17; Matthew 5:20; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 10:4; Philippians 3:9; Matthew 5:6; Romans 4:3; Hosea 10:12).

Reckon you're good enough? Think again!
Inside each of us dwells the mark of Cain.
God reckons righteousness to us, cancels our sin,
Helps us to conquer our struggles within.
Trying to earn salvation, being worldly wise
Ends with us being righteous in our own eyes.
Offer our bodies, then, as a living sacrifice,
Unclean vessels washed pure at great price.
Speak ill of no-one, let your faith shine,
No longer wild olives but grafts in God's vine:
Every worldly gain we now count as loss,
Status and pride, we consider them dross,
Surrendering all at the foot of the cross.

Trinity

It took me a long time to realise why the doctrine of the Trinity was such a big deal. Many gentiles were attracted to Judaism because its belief in one God provided a welcome contrast to their own multiple and often capricious gods. However, Christianity's claim to monotheism could seem incompatible with its belief in 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. Here's my attempt to understand the Triune God.

The Lord God, Jehovah Jireh, Almighty One
Revealed himself fully through Jesus, the son,
Image of the invisible God, firstborn of creation,
Name above all names; and for our confirmation
Indwells as the Holy Spirit, our truth, our inspiration.
Three personae bearing witness to one another
Yet indivisible, our Father, Comforter, Brother.

Most Excellent Way

“And now I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). A reflection on 1 Corinthians 13.

Maturity of faith demands love that is tough
Once I thought as a child, but now that’s not enough,
Songs of praise and speaking in tongues
Turn sour if I keep records of wrongs,
Each boast and reproach is best left unsaid.
X is a cross where love suffered and bled:
Covenant love longs to reconcile
Ever willing to go the extra mile.
Love never fails, it trusts, perseveres,
Lights up the darkness, wipes away tears,
Enables the broken to revive and cope.
Now, three gifts remain – faith, hope,
Then, conquering everything, love.
Wongs are forgotten when we rise above
Anger and envy, and let grace hold sway.
Yes – there is a most excellent way.

Body of Christ

We are the body of Christ – if one part suffers, we all suffer. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Psalm 139:13-14)

Bones, flesh, lifeblood, sinews combine,
Organs, hormones obey God's design,
Dispute no more about which part is best.
Young, give freely of ideals and zest

Old, your experience and wisdom share
Feast upon testimonies seasoned with prayer.

Consider you are wonderfully and fearfully made
Healed in the heart now sin's price has been paid
Rise above doctrine, banish division
Inspire each member to strive for one vision
Suffer together, together rejoice
Tongues of prophecy tell out as one voice.

Year of Young People

This was written for the Church of Scotland's *Year of Young People* (2018). Although the original context has been lost, I decided to keep the acrostic because it follows on well from the previous one. Ending with 'everyone' was intentional, because the issue isn't simply one of trying to recruit and retain the 'under-25s' (which was the official definition of 'young') – it's about young and old and everyone in-between sharing their faith, experiences and talents. Churches that aren't intergenerational tend to become dwindling time-capsules. (1 Timothy 4:12; Acts 6:1-4; Acts 2:17).

Yes! to the hopes and fears,
Energy, vision, fresh ideas,
Actions, dreams, decisions,
Radical views and visions

Of the under-25s –
Faith-inspired, vibrant lives.

Yes! to the music and songs
Of a thousand youthful tongues
Uniting us as we seek and search
New paths to revival in our church –
Generation “Z” has some really cool
Prayers and prophecies for renewal!
Everybody, play your part,
Old and young and young-at-heart:
Pick up the baton, pass it on
Let's seize the moment before it's gone
Every child, every teen, everyone.

Objects of God's Love

However, being an intergenerational 'body of Christ' means that we have to get on with all manner of people, like it or not. God's love is unconditional. Is ours? God shows no partiality and is no respecter of persons (Leviticus 19:15; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). (Again, this acrostic does not rhyme, but has proved popular).

'Orrible 'ooligans

Bad boys wiv bovver boots

Junkies, users, boozers

'Ells Angel 'eadcases

Chancers, shirkers

Trailer trash

Sex workers

'Ooray 'Enrys

Feral youth

Gamblers, wide boys

Outcasts, outsiders

Dossers, down-and-outs

Smackheads, layabouts

Losers, loners, winos

Oddballs, weirdos

Vagrants, hoboes

Everyone, in fact

The *Fruits of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22-23) are often confused with the *Gifts of the Spirit* (mainly set out in 1 Corinthians 12), so here are two acrostic *aide memoires* about which is which.

Fruits of the Spirit

Followers of Jesus

Respond with *love*, spread *joy*.

United

In the Spirit

They foster *peace*,

Show *patience*, and don't annoy.

Others' burdens bearing

Freely, gladly sharing

They act with *kindness*

Hold fast to all *goodness*

Exemplify *faithfulness*.

Saints act with *gentleness* and

Practise *self-control*; they endure

Insults and injuries with

Rejoicing. To be sure,

If you abide in the Spirit,

Then you are free from the law.

Gifts of the Spirit

God's Holy Spirit intercedes,
Imparting talents to us in different measure
For the common good and particular needs.
To some, *wisdom* is a special treasure;
Still others are given *knowledge* to convey.

Others, in times of trouble, are a strong tower –
Faith, deep and sure, they display.

Then, there are those whose power
Heals the broken body, the heart that's riven.
Even more, some have the ability to perform

Signs and *miracles*; whilst some are given
Prophetic powers to counsel and warn.
Ineffable words are spoken by some, through
Rapturous *tongues* from angels above.
Interpreting those tongues is for others to do –
Though greater than any talent, is the gift of *love*.

Impossible

Throughout the Bible there is one enduring theme, which provides a fitting place to conclude these reflections. The things which are impossible with people are possible with God (Genesis 18:14; Luke 1:37; Luke 18:24-43; Mark 9:23; Matthew 19:26; Jeremiah 32:17; Philippians 4:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13). If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)

In this world, some things cannot possibly be.
Moses couldn't possibly have parted the Red Sea,
Peter could never have preached with authority
Or walked upon the Lake of Galilee,
Slaves to sin could not possibly be set free,
Sarah couldn't have experienced maternity,
Israel couldn't be redeemed from captivity,
Bartimæus couldn't possibly ever see,
Love couldn't have changed the course of history.
Everything, with Jesus, is a possibility.