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Weeks 7 to 14: Notes coming soon

Introduction

A few weeks ago, I was remembering my first year of following Jesus and the people who had played a part in helping me find Jesus and learn how to follow him. I am immensely grateful to them all. Especially the church family of All Saints, Berkhamsted. They welcomed a 16-year-old lad, wondering how to live his life for Jesus and what it would be like to be part of a church. They listened to me, prayed with me, encouraged me in worshipping Jesus, helped me understand the Bible. In time they trained me in helping others to find Jesus and to walk alongside them as they too discovered how to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. In short, they showed me the new life that Jesus offers, and I came to recognise that I was and am a living stone amongst other living stones and that together we are a spiritual house, a holy priesthood.

Peter's description of the church as living stones built on Jesus the living cornerstone continues to be a source of great encouragement and excitement for me.

1 Peter 2:4-10

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

⁶ For in Scripture it says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

⁸ and,

*“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Peter describes with breathtaking clarity the identity, life and mission of the church. The church is all who in Jesus have become living stones. Those who have moved from darkness to light, who were not a people and are now the people of God. The life of the church, built of living stones, is intentionally dynamic. We adapt and change to make space for new living stones and to build each other up in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the church is simply to reach the not-yet-living stones that the Holy Spirit leads us to.

This autumn we are going to explore together our identity and purpose as the living stones who are built together as Christ Church. We will explore the biblical basis for our identity and purpose, and the practical aspects of how we work this out. We'll share testimonies of God's mission in and through us. We'll engage in practical application of being living stones built by God into a spiritual house.

These include:

4 th October	Big Church Family Day
12 th October	Generosity Sunday
19 th October	Team building and BYO lunch after the 10 Gathering
16 th November	Inviting people in our parish to Christmas at Christ Church

And much more, check our website and media feeds for up-to-date information.

Week 1, Vision: Our Identity

Starting: 7th September 2025

If you were asked “What is distinctive about Christ Church Clifton?” how would you answer? Take some time to write your answer below.

I wonder what you spoke about in your answer. Our location? Our building? Our weekly activities? Our people? Our relationship with Jesus?

We are a people who seek to follow Jesus and meet regularly in a building in Clifton. Other than the ‘Clifton’ part, the same could be said of every church family throughout the world. Yet God has called us together. At some point each of us had made a choice to make our home amongst the people of Christ Church Clifton. We will have many different stories about why we chose to make our home here. What’s your story?

Way back in the book of Exodus there’s a time when God says to Moses,

“have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”
(Exodus 25:8-9)

The remainder of Exodus recounts God giving the blueprint and the people creating the tabernacle. The people of God are to be one people and they are to build a sanctuary in which God will dwell among them. We find this pattern repeated as we go through the

Old Testament. The tabernacle is replaced by the temple, but the pattern is the same. Peter reminds his readers that this pattern continues albeit with an important difference. The people of God no longer need to build a sanctuary for God to dwell among them. They are built by God into a sanctuary for him to dwell among them (1 Peter 2:4–5). This is a massive change, but it is an outcome of the most massive event in all history—the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Before this event, the temple and prior to that the tabernacle was the focus and centre of the people of God for at its heart was the holy of holies where God dwelt among them. Now, for all followers of Jesus, the focus and centre are not found in a specific building, they are found in Jesus who sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. Not that we are each to be an isolated temple, rather, that we are built together into a temple or spiritual house to use Peter’s language.

How does all this help us to understand our identity and more specifically our distinctive features as the people who are Christ Church?

First, our identity is corporate. Whilst we are comprised of unique individuals, we are an ‘us.’ Second, each individual is built as a living stone into one spiritual house. This means that each church is distinctive for it will be comprised of different living stones equipped by God with different gifts and skills.

- The church in Thessalonica was known for its strong faith, love, and hope (1 Thessalonians 1:3).
- The church in Ephesus was known for its hard work, perseverance, and sound doctrine (Revelation 2:2–3), although it had lost its first love (Revelation 2:4).
- The church in Philippi was known for its partnership in the gospel and generosity (Philippians 1:5; 4:15–18).

At Christ Church we express our identity like this: Inviting Everyone to Follow Jesus. God is calling us to be known for our invitation. A generous invitation that is extended to everyone regardless of background. An invitation to be part of our family. An invitation to encounter Jesus. An invitation to follow Jesus and receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

As a follower of Jesus who has chosen to make Christ Church home, you are a ‘living stone’ that God has carefully and intentionally placed amongst other living stones to build this spiritual house. How does it feel to be part of this?

Take time to pray with others about our identity as Christ Church. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you describe to others the invitation that we offer at Christ Church. Working together with those you are praying with, write down the words you might use to do this.

If you would like some inspiration, here are some words from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus that describe their identity.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Week 2, Vision: Our Purpose

Starting: 14th September 2025

God is on the move in this city, this nation and beyond. There is a growing hunger to find out about Jesus and get to know him. Especially amongst the younger generations. In August, I met with a friend who is part of a church in London. He was telling me that they are seeing 250 people turning up each week on a Monday morning to worship and pray for 90 minutes. This is in a church of 1000 people. God is on the move.

We might just be on the verge of the most significant revival the UK has seen since the charismatic renewal in the 1980s, or the Hebridean revival in the 1950s, or the East of England revival in the 1920s, or the Welsh revival in the 1900s. In time we will know. The question we have before us is, do we want to stay on the sidelines as spectators or get on the field and play our part? At Christ Church we want to be on the field playing our part. God is calling us to help people find Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly. Choosing to play our part puts us in the midst of an exciting and massive work of mission alongside other churches in this city. It is a work that will require all of us to pull together, encouraging one another to give our all in obedience to the Holy Spirit. It's great that we can communicate our purpose in one sentence. However, we need to take the next steps of working out what this means for us in practical terms. How do we actually do this as the people who are Christ Church Clifton?

Let's begin this work by writing down our understanding of how, today, we help people find Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly.

Sometimes this work seems clear. Perhaps we have the opportunity to pray for a colleague or share our story of following Jesus with a friend. Other times we might wonder how the things we do connect with God's mission. When we view our involvement in God's mission as a whole community thing our many different activities can work together to fulfil God's call on us.

In Leviticus 23 there are no less than eight community activities described as essential aspects of the life and worship of the people of God. We find the sabbath and Passover,

the feasts of, unleavened bread, first-fruits, weeks, trumpets, and tabernacles, and the day of atonement. The daily aspects of life and worship are interconnected and all part of a broader annual rhythm. Read through the chapter and you will find people eating, celebrating, giving gifts and freewill offerings, praying, serving the poor, resting, camping, fasting, praising, and more. Take these activities and work out all the different parts that need to come together for them to happen and you'll see the involvement of the whole community.

In the twenty first century some of the activities of the followers of Jesus look a bit different. It is no longer necessary to offer physical sacrifices for our atonement as Jesus has given his life that we may have life. We no longer need a temple as the focal point of our worship. However, we are still a people who are called to eat, celebrate, give, pray, serve, rest, fast, pray, and more. We can do these things with the express purpose of becoming a community who know Jesus more deeply, obey the Holy Spirit more confidently, and love each other more unconditionally. When we do this we grow in confidence in sharing our stories with those who have not yet met Jesus and chosen to follow him. We grow in commitment to prayer, recognising how essential it is to our life and worship. We enjoy eating and celebrating together because we get to be with our sisters and brothers in Jesus. As a community we become increasingly welcoming and attractive to those who are not yet part of our family.

Have a look here ccweb.org.uk/whatson to see the many different opportunities available for you to connect with others in our church family. Pray together with others and write down the ways in which you will connect with our church family. Which activities will you prioritise?

How might you serve at these activities?

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What's your response to God's invitation to be involved in his mission? Will you choose to stay on the sidelines as a spectator or get on the field and play your part? Getting involved can be both scary and exciting. Pray for each other as you offer yourselves to God to follow where the Holy Spirit leads you.

Week 3, The Heart of Generosity

The Biblical blueprint for giving

Starting: 21st September 2025

Jesus left a small group of disciples waiting in an upper room to be baptised with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1). They didn't know what that would be like or what would happen after that event. Within about 20 years of these disciples being baptised with the Holy Spirit, there were churches in Galatia, Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome to name some of those we read of in the New Testament. This planting of local churches and providing them with autonomy over the ongoing mission in and through their geographical area established a model for mission that continued into the fourth century. Beyond the fourth century there was growth of centralised models for mission. The subsequent centuries saw extensive interplay and tension between these two models. More recently we have seen a resurgence of mission through the local church. The local model is the most highly scalable, adaptable and dynamic model for mission. When it is outworked in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit it can also be considered centralised as it prioritises God's plan for mission.

What is your preferred model for mission and why?

In the UK, organisations such as re.vitalise trust (revitalisetrust.org), New Wine (new-wine.org), Fusion (fusionmovement.org) have recognised the effectiveness of mission through the local church and are working to equip local churches to increase their effectiveness in local mission. Alongside this work we are regularly hearing exciting stories of a growing hunger, especially amongst younger generations, to know Jesus. These people are connecting with their local churches and asking for answers about life, the Bible, and Jesus.

How do you feel about the resurgence of local mission amongst UK churches?

The high level of autonomy given to local churches in New Testament times included financial autonomy. We read of the followers of Jesus sustaining the local church through financial giving and thereby sustaining the missional work of their local church (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Giving was not limited to the local church. It extended to supporting ministers in the wider network of churches (Philippians 4:15-17; 3 John 5-8) and to churches in need of financial support (2 Corinthians 8-9).

Mission through the local church is highly effective and scalable if it is sufficiently funded. This type of mission requires every member of a church to be equipped for mission. That requires us to train those who will train others. It requires us to provide ways for the church family to come together in prayer, worship, sharing of testimonies, eating, celebrating etc. The more we get to know each other the more we can work together in the mission God has given us. This requires time, resources and money. If we are going to increase our effectiveness in mission we will need to fund our local activities. This brings us to the following three weeks in our focus on financial generosity where we will explore different approaches to understanding how much and to whom God is asking us to give.

In preparation for the coming weeks, pray with others and share how you hear God in relation to financial giving. Write down any important aspects for you.

Reflect on God's word, through Moses, to his people,

You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. (Deuteronomy 8:17-18)

What are your thoughts on this?

Week 4, United in Generosity

Building God's kingdom together

Starting: 28th September 2025

We are in this together! God builds us as living stones into a spiritual house where we share in the responsibility of playing our part in God's mission. This includes our financial giving. It is right that we do not go around sharing how much we give for that might create hierarchies amongst us where those who give the most are given greater honour. In God's kingdom all are valued equally and financial giving is measured more by sacrifice than amount. All that considered, it doesn't mean that the topic and act of giving becomes an entirely solo pursuit. Quite the opposite. It is a topic we should be approaching through shared conversation, prayer, and action.

When the people of God are preparing to build the tabernacle, the Lord asks the people to give what they are willing.

'Moses said to the whole Israelite community, "This is what the LORD has commanded: From what you have, take an offering for the LORD. Everyone who is willing is to bring to the LORD an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece' (Exodus 35: 4–9).

This is all God's plan. He has commanded his people to 'make a sanctuary' so that he 'will dwell among them' (Exodus 25:8). God reveals his plan for how the creation of the sanctuary will be funded. He reveals this before he gives Moses the design for the tabernacle and then makes the request of his people before the materials are gathered and building commences. God says to Moses, 'tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give' (Exodus 25:2). What we are seeing unfold here is the partnership between God and his people. They have freewill and they have a deciding part to play in God's plan. Each member of the community is to listen to the prompting of their heart (25:2) and decide if they are willing to contribute (35:5). We see a similar pattern in the building of the first temple (1 Chronicles 29).

This is a good launchpad for a conversation about giving at Christ Church. God has invited us to play our part in the heavenly transformation of people and culture in Bristol by helping people find Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly. He has given us a building

to use. Led us in establishing a staff team with a broad range of gifts and skills directed towards various ministry areas. Gathered followers of Jesus from in and around Bristol and equipped them with gifts and skills for this mission work. Money is required to sustain and grow all of this.

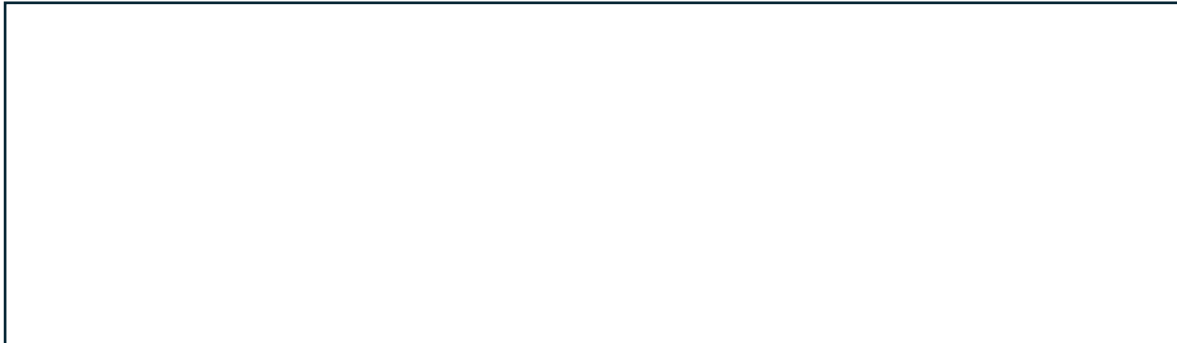
That is the need, the next part is the invitation to give. That is a matter of heart and will. Do our hearts prompt us to give and are we willing to give. When the heart is spoken of in this way it means making a choice from our inner core that encompasses our values, attitudes, desires, and beliefs. In the New Testament we find a similar command in 2 Corinthians 9:7, 'Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

On previous occasions, how have you 'decided in your heart' what to give?

The work we are to do in discerning whether to give to the local church is to examine and reflect on our values, attitudes, desires, and beliefs. This is an inner work that enables us to make a voluntary and unforced decision. The work is not to examine and judge whether the need is worthy or justifiable, rather, it is to understand whether we are truly willing to give freely. You may find the following prompts provide a helpful structure for this work.

1. What is God's will for me regarding my finances? Pray, with others if you feel comfortable doing so, and ask God to give you the gift of a cheerful heart that desires to honour him through your giving.
2. Thank God for the financial resources you have.
Recognise that all you have comes from God.
3. The next part is best done on your own or with your spouse if you are married.
Write down your income and expenditure and prayerfully consider what proportion of it you will give back to God.
4. Pray, with others if you feel comfortable doing so, and ask God to give you confidence to give to his work through the local church.

You may like to make a note of any sense you have of God revealing his heart to you on these matters. What is your sense of the proportion of your income that you will give to God. How is your heart? Are you giving freely and cheerfully?

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Back to the tabernacle. The giving by God's people was so abundant that the skilled workers said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done." Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work (Exodus 36:5-7).

God provides for the work he calls us to do! He provides by inviting us to give to the local church we are part of.

Week 5, Courageous Generosity

Trusting God's provision

Starting: 5th October 2025

Who is God? What's he like? Can I trust him?

Have you ever asked big questions like these?

I have, and when these kinds of questions are in my mind I take them to the place of prayer. I reframe them and ask the one who knows. "God, who are you? What are you like? Can I trust you?" Sometimes God answers with a peace and an assurance that he loves me perfectly. Other times I'm prompted to open the pages of my Bible. Take some time now to read Psalm 8.

Psalm 8

*LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.*

*Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

*You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:*

*all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

*LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

If this is who God is and what he is like then we have no need to worry about this day or any of the days ahead. The big story of the Bible is all about God's love for humankind, a love so great that he would die in our place that we might be redeemed, reconciled, and restored to right relationship with him.

Why touch on these things when we are looking at generosity? I believe that our generosity is shaped by our understanding of God's generosity towards us. The more we get to know God, the more we understand how vast his love is for us and how certain his sovereignty is. We do this by inviting the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth and then as we read the Bible, pray, worship, and serve, inviting the Holy Spirit to reveal the heart of the Father to us.

If the sovereign creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is in it asks me to give from the resources he has already given me, should I not be quick to give in obedience to his request? But I sometimes find myself making excuses. God, can I trust you? Can I trust the one who made the heavens and the earth, who loves and cares for me like no other! I might then feel a bit embarrassed that I even asked the question. But God invites us to meet him as we are. To ask him the questions that we hold in our hearts. He knows us completely and invites us to approach him in the raw reality of where we are right now. I find that when I am real with God and dare to ask him the big questions I experience his presence with more confidence, hear him with more clarity, and know his love, grace and mercy with more certainty.

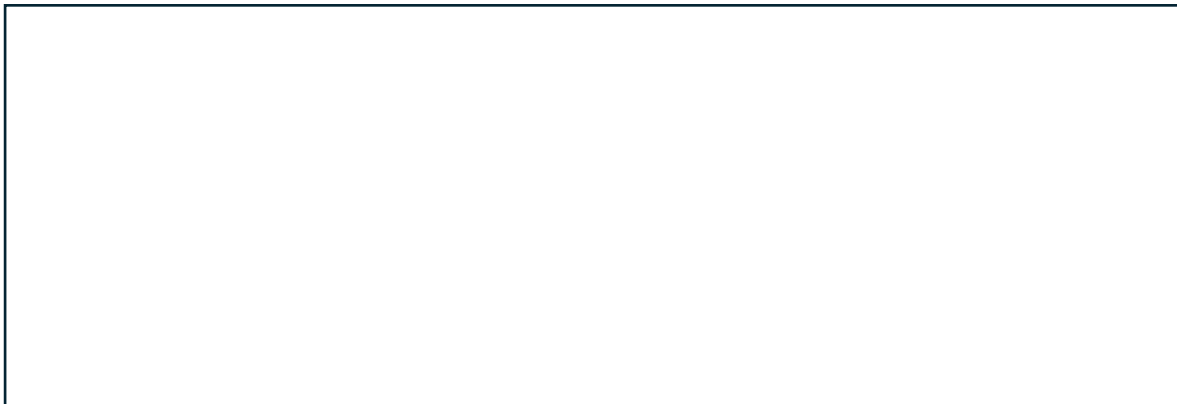
What big questions would you like to ask God?

Take some time, with others if you feel comfortable, sharing these questions and praying together. Which passages in the Bible speak into your questions? Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth. Then seek to be as present as you can with the living God.

Last week we explored what God might be asking each of us to give. How can we be confident that what God is asking of us is ok? Perhaps what he is asking is a stretch, yet we are confident that it is God asking us and that we have heard him clearly. How do we

respond with obedient action when it doesn't seem feasible or sensible? This is the challenge of trust. Our trust in God grows as we act on that trust. God trusts us with small things and as we do them and see that God can be trusted, he trusts us with bigger things (Luke 16:10). We cannot simply think our way into great trust in God. Our current level of trust in God must be put to the test through our actions. Only then do we find that our trust in God was ok and we might dare to trust God a bit more. It is often the times when I declare, "God I trust you completely," that I find God inviting me into a level of trust in which my response is "I don't trust you that much, God." There's the opportunity for growth, and that growth will only come through saying yes to God's invitation that is bigger than my current level of trust.

What is God's invitation for you that is larger than your current level of trust?

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Pray with others for the confidence to say yes to God. Saying yes to God may include hard challenges but it will always be good for God is good.

Week 6, Offering our all

Generosity as an act of worship

Starting: 12th October 2025

A couple of weeks back we were exploring how the people of God gave for the creation of the tabernacle. We ended that week by recognising the abundance of the people's giving. Let's read the whole of that account in Exodus 36.

Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work. They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled workers who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left what they were doing and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done." Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work. (Exodus 36:2–7)

This was a freewill offering. The people of God gave as their hearts prompted and they were willing. And this freewill offering led to an abundance of generosity. The giving was so much over and above what they needed that Moses had to tell them to stop giving. The freewill and abundance demonstrated here provide a picture of giving as worship.

There are many other examples we could turn to.

The poor widow giving in the temple (Mark 12:41–44) could have given only one of her two remaining coins and that would have been extravagant. But she willingly chose to also give the other coin. Perhaps not abundance in monetary terms, but from the widow's perspective, and God's, this was abundant and sacrificial giving. It was an act of worship.

The Macedonian church's generosity.

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I

testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. (2 Corinthians 8)

Each of these examples shows people responding generously to God's invitation to be part of his mission. These people give freely without any sense of obligation or expectation of return. Their giving is an act of abundant worship to the living God. It is a declaration of trust in the sovereign God. A recognition that God's plans and purposes are greater than their financial security.

Over the last three weeks we have explored the theological foundation for financial generosity, our shared involvement in sustaining the local church, and the confidence we can have in God as we respond in obedience. This week we are invited to participate in giving to Christ Church to enable, sustain and grow God's work of mission in and through us. Our decision to give must be made freely without obligation or expectation. We're invited to respond as we feel prompted in our hearts and as we are willing.

Take some time to pray and write down your response to this invitation

Whilst our response to the invitation is personal, our giving is corporate. Together, we share in enabling, sustaining and growing our work of inviting everyone to follow Jesus and helping people find Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly.

Pray with others thanking God for all that he is doing in and through us. What words would you use to express thanks to God?