



Songs of the Faith

A series of 7 talks, written by Andrew Wileman, Asst Director of Older People's Services, Salvation Army for the Daily Hope phone line with Faith in Later Life.

1. All Creatures of our God and King

His name was Giovanni Bernardone, but he became known as St. Francis of Assisi an Italian Catholic friar and preacher. The son of a wealthy merchant, he was expected to follow in his father's footsteps but rebelled against the pursuit of money. As a young man, he experienced a vision that persuaded him to renounce wealth so that he might live a life of poverty and service.

He heard a sermon based on Matthew 10, in which Christ tells his followers to go forth and proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. Inspired by Christ's instruction to take no money, nor even shoes, for the road, Francis followed suit. Clothed in rough garments and barefoot, he began to take on a life of poverty preaching repentance and bringing run-down chapels and shrines to restoration. He soon gathered a following of men and women who led simple lives without possessions, but with cheerful countenances and full of songs leaving a lasting impact on anyone who heard them. These men and women became known as the Order of "Franciscans" who still hold a powerful ministry today.

In 1226, with his vision failing and his life nearing its end, he wrote a poem titled "The Canticle of the Sun." In his weakened state, he celebrated the call for all creation to praise God as Creator. Francis was very well known for his care and attention to animals. In fact, his enthusiasm for preaching the gospel and his love for animals occasionally drove him to go so far as to preach sermons to flocks of birds.

William Draper translated it from Latin to English in 1910 for a children's festival, he paraphrased the original poem to what we know today as the mighty Hymn 'All Creatures of our God and King'

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I've learnt a valuable lesson today in writing about this Hymn.

If you are like me, you usually think of humanity alone praising God. This song challenges us to see beyond that. It opens to us the mystery and grandeur of God's

creation. It's not just God and me. It's not just you, some friends, God, and me. This song reminds us that it's not even merely humanity and God.

If St. Francis is right, creation praises God simply by being. "Thou burning sun with golden beam, thou silver moon with softer gleam;" "Thou rushing wind that art so strong, Ye clouds that sail in Heaven along;" "Thou flowing water, pure and clear, make music for thy Lord to hear." These parts of creation praise God by just doing what they were created to do.

"Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at his command they were created" (Psalm 148: 1-5)

What are you created to do?

We are all specially created and made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). God has plans and purposes for you individually. We were created to worship God. All of us. Individually, corporately, continually.

As we continue to live through these most extraordinary times it's good to ask God to continue to build us up and grow in our worship life. I'll be praying for the Holy Spirit to move our hearts constantly to worship our creator God.

It is what we were created to do!

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2. Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Today, we turn to the mighty classic by Charles Wesley.....'Love Divine All Loves Excelling'. Do you believe in love at first sight? Charles Wesley did. The prolific hymn writer and itinerant evangelist met the love of his life on August 28, 1747. Sarah "Sally" Gwynne was the twenty-one-year-old daughter of his good friend, Marmaduke Gwynne. Wesley later admitted to Sally in a letter that "at first sight of you, my soul seemed pleased to take acquaintance with thee. And never have I found such nearness to any fellow-creature as to you." After a two-year courtship, Charles and Sally married on April 8, 1749.

It's significant that the first line reads "all loves excelling." Wesley recognised that his love for Sally filled his thoughts and governed his actions. Yet, as intense as his love for Sally was, Jesus' love for him exceeded it in both degree and purpose. In that way, his relationship with Sally gave Wesley a greater appreciation for Jesus' "pure, unbounded love."

On April 29, 2011, millions of people around the world turned on their televisions to watch one of the most anticipated spectacles of the year, the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. The ceremony featured several hymns, one of which was "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," This ceremony represented the "dream" for romance, a prince finding his princess, true loves coming together, and a couple rising above the odds to be together. This, we argue so easily, is love.

Any wedding is of course a celebration of love. Yet this wonderful hymn of Wesley reflects on the Love above all loves. We are only able to love one another because Christ first loved us. God is love, and we are the mirrors and bearers of that love to each other.

To better understand 'love divine', consider the opposite false "love," which sets limitations and always withholds something. This so-called love clings to control and gives only to use and manipulate. False love is emotionally rubbish and unwilling to be vulnerable. Genuine love, on the other hand, respects people as they are. It means understanding who the other person really is and loving without restriction. If you must be in control and your heart is not 100% in it, you're missing 'Love Divine'

Let's imagine for a moment that 'Love Divine' by looking at the love of Jesus Christ on the cross and in this we see the most perfect demonstration of love anywhere. If you're ever unsure about what true love really looks like, turn to the cross. Jesus gave His best, His all, to love us so that we could become children of God.

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32

Love Divine is what changes us. The more we rely on and gaze upon God's great love for us, the more we are changed. His love is incomparable, far deeper and stronger than any other love.

Let's fuel our hearts for change today with the love divine that surpasses all other loves, and I assure you we will once again find ourselves lost in 'Wonder, Love and Praise'.

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3. Be Still

Today, we come and reflect on another favourite Hymn that speaks into our hearts. This song is consistently in the Top 5 of Hymns chosen by the BBC 'Songs of Praise' viewers. It is the powerful and moving 'Be Still'

"Be Still for the Presence of the Lord" was written by Dave Evans in 1985 and he is based just up the road from me in Southampton. Dave was involved in the charismatic movement of the 1980/90's but he felt that some of its worship risked treating God in a trivial fashion. Specifically, he was inspired by the verse in the Genesis 28:16 - "then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.'

Jacob could probably be forgiven for not knowing that God was in the desert where he'd spent the night with only a stone for a pillow. The harsh landscape around him matched the landscape of his own life. He was on the run from his older brother Esau whom he'd

tricked out of both his birth right and their father's blessing. Not surprisingly, Esau was after him.

So, Jacob escaped to the wilderness. That night he dreamt of a ladder that stretched to the heavens, filled with angels going up and down. Nothing in the landscape around him pointed to the possibility of such an amazing vision. No wonder he woke from sleep and proclaimed, "Surely God was in this place and I did not know it!"

In preparing this I asked myself this question and I turn it over to you today "When did you last experience God's sacred space and holy ground?and am I in need of it again?"

About 10 years ago I was in a particularly dark place and felt abandoned by God and let down by the Christian community around me. I stepped away from attending the Church for a few weeks and sought worship elsewhere. The rather wonderful Kings Chamber Orchestra who are a group of Christian musicians who play in Orchestras around the UK came to give a concert at a small church in Bournemouth.

They closed the concert with an arrangement of 'Be Still' and as this beautiful tune got underway, I was overcome and gripped with a very real presence of the presence of God and the place became literally 'Holy Ground' under my feet. I found myself sobbing uncontrollably and the pain, angst and hurt of the past was swept away by an overwhelming sense of healing and the presence of God.

Holy ground moments require that we kneel before Him to accept the path He has revealed, even when it is usually only a piece of the puzzle. This will require enormous faith and trust along a road we have never travelled before. It will look impossible. And it is without God.

Whatever you are going through right now, seek God's presence during it. Whatever pressure you are under, or issue you are struggling with, look for God's stillness in it. Make time to find what is sacred, instead of dwelling on what makes you scared. Take off your shoes and dance with God, for holy ground is where we can best delight in His pleasure, blessing, and love.

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4. Will Your Anchor Hold

A few miles from my house and based on the edge of Poole Harbour is the UK Headquarters of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). Every year, volunteer lifeboat crews and lifeguards help, and rescue thousands of people and they have saved over 143,000 lives over the last 200 years.

Outside the Headquarters building in Poole is a huge anchor representing the fact that every sea-faring boat has a need for an anchor. It connects a boat to the seabed to prevent it from drifting due to winds or currents.

Lots of hymns and gospel songs make use of this anchor metaphor. Every one of them comes back to Hebrews 6:19: "This hope we have as an anchor of the soul "

You and I have been around long enough to experience several storms in our personal and spiritual lives. I've learned that in turbulent times like this, there is nothing more secure than the anchor of God's promises. What should we do when things look as if they are falling apart and we are battered by big problems? An anchor does nothing for a boat unless it is tied with a rope or chain. The same applies to us. We need to be firmly attached to the anchor of hope with a rope of faith.

"Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight". Acts 27:29

On the Missionary Journey to Rome when a winter storm began to toss their vessel, sailors aboard that ship hearing the creaking and groaning of the timbers, feared their ship would break up. After all, things like that happened. They were off an island in the midst of the stormy Mediterranean. It looked grim. A doctor on board wrote the log of the voyage. "Hope of our being saved," he wrote, "was gradually abandoned." At midnight they were about to be driven on the rocks when Luke the author of Acts wrote, "We cast four anchors out of the ship and prayed for daylight."

The safest thing to do when we get in a storm is to drop our anchors. Just stand still. In life too, sometimes we find ourselves in the despair that Luke and the Apostle Paul were confronted with, and these can be threatening, grave situations. The crew of the ship cast four anchors that brought them safely through the storm. I'm going to take that Biblical promise and briefly offer these four 'anchors' for our devotional today.

The first anchor that will strengthen you in the storm is the anchor of God's Word, the Bible. The Bible is something like a chart that depicts the unknown, sometimes uncharted, sea of life.

The second anchor, which can give you stability, is faith in Jesus. The Bible says that faith in Christ is an anchor of the soul that is sure and steadfast. In the language of the sea, when a person walks with Christ, He stands beside him and walks with us in our storms.

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The third anchor is that of prayer. This anchor is very powerful and should be used always, not just when you are in trouble!! Prayer can be a powerful anchor not just to keep you from being thrown on the rocks, but it cannot slip, and it cannot break down under whatever pressure bears down on it.

The Fourth anchor is God's promise. God keeps His promises without fail. Storms cannot hide our face from God, because God is always with us.

Let me finish with a question. What are you anchored to? Is it stronger than what you are going through? Sometimes it may be a calamity that thousands are facing together, or it may be a personal battle that no one else even knows you are dealing with. But God knows. He knows and he cares.

When the storm hits, anchor to no one but God. Hold Fast!

5. Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus

It's rare to find a hymn or song that relates to an incident or event that occurred in the authors' life. "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus" is an exception as it was composed in the aftermath of the untimely death of the author's friend.

Dudley Tyng was a young preacher in Philadelphia, USA and he often held revival meetings at the local YMCA during lunch and soon began to attract big crowds. In March of 1858 Dudley preached a rousing sermon to 5,000 young men at the YMCA and over 1,000 made a profession of faith.

A few days later Dudley would be working in the barn on his family's farm where he got his arm trapped in the cogs of a machine being pulled by a horse. He passed away a few days later from his very severe injuries.

Before he died, he was asked if he had a message for the ministers at the Philadelphia revival and he replied, "Tell them, 'Let us all stand up for Jesus.'" His friend and fellow preacher, Dr George Duffield, was touched by the words and wrote the hymn 'Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus'. It brings a whole new (and squeamish!) meaning to when we sing "The arm of flesh will fail you."

"Stand true to what you believe. Be courageous. Be strong" (1 Corinthians 16:13b NLT).

You see it over and over in Scripture. God uses people who show courage, people who stand up when everyone else sits down. It's a challenge for us today in an ever-changing world. In our own ways, each of us faces challenges and situations in which we are asked to prove our priorities and loyalties. How far will we go to demonstrate our commitment to the Gospel? Are we willing to stand up for our faith, or compromise? Are we willing to endure criticism? Are we willing to serve Jesus, no matter what others might say? No matter what it might cost?

Being a Christian can sometimes feel like swimming upstream while everybody and everything else is going downstream. It would be great if God would somehow steer us away from those situations that require having to make those seemingly tough decisions to be fair and honest; to stand up for what is right, just, and true.

Several years ago, I began playing golf. For a few weeks I had lessons with the golf professional at a local club. He discussed and demonstrated the importance of how we stand when addressing the ball. "Your stance is everything" he would say every week. I thought about how that statement is applicable not only to golf, but to life.

You see, even though we can't control what happens in the world, we can always control where we stand on issues of righteousness and knowing what matters. Where we choose to stand will be evidence of the role that we are allowing God to play in our lives.

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Proverbs 20:5 says, "Knowing what is right is like deep water in the heart; a wise person draws from the well within" (The Message).

That is where "your stance is everything" really begins - in the heart. If our faith is strong and grounded, then we will be able to rely on that wisdom when faced with opportunities to choose where to stand, knowing that the power of God will empower us to make good decisions.

Sometimes it may seem that we have no control over certain situations in our own lives, much less the things happening in the world. But there is good news - we always have the choice and our "stance is everything" in the game of life.

6. Onward Christian Soldiers

No other song has become more associated with the work and ministry of The Salvation Army than 'Onward Christian Soldiers'

Can you imagine the outcry if the Salvation Army ever tried to drop 'Onward Christian Soldiers' from its Song-book? Well, the Methodists tried! The Methodist Church was in the process of revising its hymnal in the mid-1980s, it made the mistake of trying to drop this song from what would soon become the current Methodist Hymnal. Well, good Methodists, and Methodists tend to be good people, started a war of their own, essentially inundating the hymn committee with correspondence which, according to the committee chair made it "impossible for the committee to go on with its work."

On the one hand, I do understand how the militaristic language can be difficult. It can be a bit jarring, and does tend to make people uncomfortable, especially when held up against the backdrop of Church history. But this song text reminds us that the church universal, the "called out" body of believers from every age, race, and culture, is to be an aggressive, unified body. It must always be moving forward in its mission. We cannot allow ourselves to become stagnant and contented with the status quo. Perhaps still a timely word for the current church and even The Salvation Army?

Onward Christian Soldiers is actually a 19th-century English hymn. The words were written by Sabine Baring-Gould and the music was composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan.

The lyric was written as a processional hymn for children walking from Horbury Bridge to Horbury St Peter's Church near Wakefield, Yorkshire, at Whitsuntide in 1865.

It was originally entitled, "Hymn for Procession with Cross and Banners."

Sabine writing about it said "It was written in a very simple fashion, without thought of publication. Whit-Monday is a great day for school festivals in Yorkshire, and one Whit-Monday it was arranged that our school should join forces with that of a neighbouring village. I wanted the children to sing marching from one village to the other, but couldn't think of anything quite suitable, so I sat up at night resolved to write something myself. "Onward Christian Soldiers" was the result. It was written in great haste, likely in less than 15 minutes"

Arguably every local Church represents an outpost of God's Army. Paul refers to those in other churches as "fellow soldiers" and urges Timothy to be a "good soldier of Christ Jesus." We are not to be an Army who hides or blends in, but an Army that stands out. And our work as Christians is to wage spiritual warfare.

I think I better leave the last word on this to General William Booth the founder of The Salvation Army: - "Whether in the Churches, the market places, the theatres, the music halls, the public houses, the brothels, their own homes or elsewhere, the death of Jesus Christ is our battle cry of victory. Christ weeping, suffering, dying for them, and waiting to wash away

their sins in His Blood, constitutes the most powerful motive to submit themselves immediately to God”

“Onward”

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7. Be Thou My Vision

Watch-out ...a bad joke is coming! In 2019 I went to the optician and I was told my eyesight is so perfect I could see into next year! He called it 20/20 Vision!!

If we could have seen what we now know about 2020. I think I might have shut my eyes!!

The reality is that I am now a regular wearer of reading glasses. In fact, reading is almost impossible without them. Maybe this is just me, or a man thing (don't answer that!) but I keep losing my glasses. So, I've resorted to buying multiple pairs from Poundland and having a pair in my Car, by my bed, by the Computer, in fact a pair of glasses usually sit on top of my head most of the day. Much to my wife's annoyance.

For years one of America's most influential Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin was forced to take two sets of glasses wherever he went: He needed one of them to see objects that were close, and a second to see distant objects. This solution was acceptable, but awkward. Then in 1785, Franklin wrote a letter that announced that he had solved this problem.

He had asked his optician to cut the lenses of his spectacles in half horizontally and fit these half-lenses in a single set of wire frames. Franklin was thrilled with the results. “I have only to move my eyes up or down, as I want to see distinctly far or near.” He called his invention “double spectacles,” but they would come to be known as “bifocals.”

The world is in need today of people who can see clearly. In the midst of our current circumstances and the ongoing challenges of the pandemic we are prone to look at life from a narrow viewpoint and with dulled vision. We live in complicated times and there are things that seem a lot more hazy. What our future will look like, how good my health will be. How will I cope as I get older?

These are all things of great importance to us and yet, so often, it all looks unclear. We have problems seeing our way ahead. We're unable to make the right decisions, because we can't see clearly what God's plans and purposes are for us.

That is why we need God. His vision is 20/20. He sees all the details of our daily lives, but He also has command of world events, both now and into the future. He can help us see clearly in every situation we face. How we view ourselves can affect our view of God, of others, our surroundings, and our work.

Once we have a better understanding of how God sees us, it helps us to have a clearer view of ourselves. We're then in a better place to begin seeing how things really are, and with God's help we learn to handle circumstances in the right way.

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'Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

A right perspective will give us a better view of the things that really matter. Whatever we can see ahead, whether clear or obscured, we can know that the Lord is always there, always, and that He will never leave us.

"Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart."

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