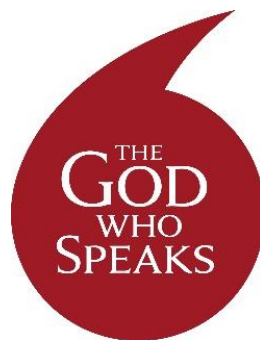


# ASCENSION AND PENTECOST

Reflections through art and scripture  
for individual or group meditation.



### **The Only Way is Up: The Ascension of Christ**

Ascension Day is one of the great solemnities in the Christian liturgical calendar, and commemorates the bodily ascension of Jesus into heaven. Ascension Day is traditionally celebrated on a Thursday, and on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. This year Ascension Day is celebrated on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May.

### **The Ascension in Scripture**

The details of Jesus' ascension described in Mark 16.19, Luke 24.50-53 and the Acts of the Apostles 1.8-11 are brief but Jesus also refers to his ascension in John 20.17 when he appears to Mary Magdalene. She searches for the risen Jesus in and around his tomb and he asks her not to touch him because he has not yet ascended.

Mark 16.19

<sup>19</sup> So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

Luke 24.50-53

<sup>50</sup> Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

<sup>51</sup> While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

<sup>52</sup> And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; <sup>53</sup> and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

John 20.17

<sup>17</sup> "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Acts 1.8-11

<sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." <sup>9</sup> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

<sup>10</sup> While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. <sup>11</sup> They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

### **The Context and Meaning of Christ's Ascension**

Before his ascension, Christ spent 40 days teaching the apostles and disciples about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1.3). The Lord encouraged them by saying that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8).

The Ascension occurred at Bethany on the Mount of Olives mentioned in Luke 19.29. Jesus had travelled through Bethany on his way to Jerusalem. It was where he asked his disciples to find a colt for him to ride, and, from then on, the crowds greeted Jesus by waving palms and rejoicing at his entry into Jerusalem (our Palm Sunday Gospel reading).

Christ's work of redemption is called the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It is fulfilled in his passion, death, resurrection, and glorious ascension into Heaven. This Paschal Mystery constitutes one action for the salvation of the world since Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." (Romans 4.25).

Jesus' ascension also signified the completion of his time on earth, celebrated 10 days before the Feast of Pentecost - the coming of the Holy Spirit. Christ was already preparing his disciples for his departure by promising them real hope when he said:

“<sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14.3).

According to Luke, when Jesus was lifted up, a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1.9).

In this text, we see two key visible things:

- a) "he was lifted up" (elevation and praise)
- b) "a cloud took him" (entrance into the divine mystery).

Jesus is physically lifted up from earth to heaven, it is a sign of another journey that Christ needs to make in order to arrive in heaven in his glorified state in God. The meaning of the ascension is, therefore, that of a revelation that the risen one has been transported into heavenly intimacy of God. This is shown by "the cloud," a well-known Old Testament biblical sign of the divine presence. So Christ disappears from the eyes of his disciples by entering the transcendent realm of the invisible God.

This is intrinsic to the mystery of Christ's purpose in ascending when he says of himself: <sup>28</sup>"I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father." (John 16.28).

This return to the Father visibly realises a messianic truth foretold in the Old Testament. Since when Mark tells us, "the Lord Jesus... was taken up into heaven" (Mark 16.19), his words echo the "prophecy of the Lord" recorded in Psalm 110.1 –  
"The Lord says to my lord,  
'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'"

To sit at the right hand of God means to share in his kingly power and divine dignity. The ascension of Christ marks the beginning of a new era for humanity. The Messiah has come and he has lived among us. He has offered the perfect sacrifice for reconciliation with the Father through his death, and has risen triumphant from the grave. Now he has departed in his earthly body so that the Holy Spirit may come. Therefore, we can say with absolute confidence the Apostles' Creed that summarises these events and their truths perfectly.

I believe in God,  
the Father Almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
He descended into hell;  
on the third day He rose again from the dead;  
**He ascended into heaven,**  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Holy Catholic Church,  
the communion of Saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting.  
Amen.



## ASCENSION



**Giotto, the Ascension of Christ, 1304-06.**

**Fresco from the Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua, Italy.**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto\\_-\\_Scrovegni\\_-\\_38\\_-\\_Ascension.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_38_-_Ascension.jpg)



Detail of some of the apostles shielding their eyes from the divine light.

### **Meditation on the painting**

The fresco cycle of which this Ascension scene is a part, painted by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, presents a narrative of the Life of the Virgin and the Life of Christ.

Giotto was an early Renaissance storyteller who was able to transcend the rules of conventional religious images, and to make them appear physically and emotionally present to the viewer. At the time in which Giotto was an artist, perspective had yet to be mastered in a two dimensional format yet he still manages to create depth. Neither had a person's mood nor their characteristics been portrayed in paint accurately, so Giotto was a pioneer of conveying a range of human feelings and enabling us to respond, with astonishing skill.

So here, Giotto shows Christ in profile, reaching up towards heaven. Look how his hands are piercing through the frame of the image to encourage us to watch his movement – this is ascension in motion. Our artist, this fresco and we, the viewers, cannot contain him while he is travelling. This is also a reference by Giotto, to old 5<sup>th</sup> century iconography in which Jesus was walking upward as if climbing a mountain. Mountains are key to Jesus' ministry and many of the Old Testament biblical revelations.

Giotto also adapts the iconographic motif of the mandorla – this is the almond shape frame around Jesus. It is much bigger than a halo as it usually surrounds the whole body rather than just the head. Unlike many mandorlas in art, there are no angels surrounding this one. Instead, the angels praise Jesus from a social distance! Some of the angels in the top left hand corner are chatting to each other – but what are they saying? And what about the two full length angels in the bottom centre, each have one hand pointing down and the other hand pointing up. By mirroring each other they convey both Christ's humanity and his divinity with their hands, as well as the ultimate truth that the risen Lord can only return to earth if he first goes to heaven.

Below all the angels, two groups of the apostles kneel with the Virgin Mary who is dressed in blue. The prominence of the story of the Virgin and her being set apart here and closest to Jesus her son, are appropriate considering that this Chapel is dedicated to the Virgin. There are only eleven apostles because it is not until later in Acts 1 that they choose a twelfth to fill the place left by Judas.

As they watch Jesus taken up to heaven surrounded in a brilliant cloud, some apostles raise their hands to protect their eyes from the divine light. What a great observation since this is exactly what we'd do in the presence of such a vision. However, Mary holds her hands lower in prayer, being the nearest to Jesus and as his mother, she doesn't need shielding from his light. Just as Mary gave birth to the light, she continues to reflect his light throughout her life.

This is a painting of rapture – in seeing Christ, our gaze is utterly focused on him and where he is ascending. Our eyes follow these first believers' eyes; they are both the eyes of those who have witnessed Christ's resurrected body and his journey back to God. This is faith through both an old and a new lens.

### **Questions for reflection**

What strikes you most about this painting?

How does Christ's ascension enrich your faith today?

### **Closing prayer**

God goes up with shouts of joy;  
the Lord goes up with trumpet blast.  
Alleluia, praise his name.  
Forever and ever,  
Amen.





**Garofalo, Ascension of Christ, 1510-20.**  
**Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.**  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wga\\_Garofalo\\_Ascension\\_of\\_Christ.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wga_Garofalo_Ascension_of_Christ.jpg)

### **Meditation on the painting**

This beautiful rendition of Jesus ascending into heaven was painted by the late-Renaissance artist Garofalo, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. This portrayal is very different from our Giotto fresco. Here we see a triumphant Christ in mid-stride without a halo or mandorla, returning to heaven while his apostles (in various emotional states and postures) remain firmly on earth to carry out their mission of spreading the Gospel.

This Christ's body is facing forwards rather than upwards to God. Jesus is looking down at his apostles as he simultaneously ascends. He points to heaven with his right hand – this is biblical Sat Nav! With his left hand, Christ blesses his friends. His feet with the wounds still visible are pushing against gravity to enhance a sense of being in transit, while defeating earth's pull upon this extraordinary event.

Garofalo was admired for the brilliant, jewel-like colours of his landscapes and people's clothing. The minute detail of the folds of the clothes on Jesus and all the apostles is exquisite adding an almost photographic reality to this scene. Jesus' white garment, billowing in the warm Italian sky, is designed to create the effect of perfect purity and light. Out of a cloud of unknowing which parts in his presence, comes the Messiah moving and mobile. At the top of the painting is a golden group of people who look far more like Old Testament heroes and prophets than of angels. They are the ancient faithful who predicted Jesus' arrival and departure, and therefore, the least surprised to welcome him home.

This architectural setting of a pretty church on one side and a castle on the other, symbols of religion and monarchy - the twin towers of power set within an airy landscape, are typical of Garofalo's work. They are divided by the real and divine king himself. The brilliant yellow and green of the sunlit foliage stand out against the snow-capped mountains, which slowly dissolve into the sky's blue blanket. In turn, all of nature's colours make their comeback in the apostles' robes below. Everything is bright and sharp: high definition in tone and texture.

Seated in the centre in blue and orange, looking up to Jesus is Saint Peter. He is recorded in the Golden Legend book of saints as having his hair and beard shaved into a round shape. The youngest one in white is surely John, the Beloved disciple. He gazes not upwards but outwards to us, towards the believers of the future church for which he wrote his gospel.

Every one of the apostles looks at either Jesus or each other from a different angle depending on where they sit or stand. They all have something to see and something to remember. They will share this event and its truth until the end of their days.

### **Questions for reflection**

What strikes you most about this painting?

Which of these two paintings do you prefer and why?

How does Scripture deepen your relationship with Christ?

### **Closing prayer**

He was lifted up while they looked on.

He made him sit at his right hand in heaven.

Alleluia, praise his name.

Forever and ever,

Amen.

## **The Dove from Above: Pentecost Day**

Pentecost is the festival when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word *pentekoste* means "fiftieth" and was borrowed from Greek-speaking Jews who used the phrase to refer to the Jewish 'Festival of Weeks'.<sup>1</sup> Pentecost therefore, occurs 50 days after Easter Sunday (and 10 days after Ascension). Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the Christian Church, and the start of the Church's mission to the world since according to the book of Acts, the apostles suddenly found themselves speaking in other languages, enabled by the Holy Spirit. This year Pentecost day is celebrated on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May.

## **Pentecost in Scripture**

The Pentecost event is found in Acts 2.1-13. It is widely held that the story of Babel in Genesis 11.1-9 is the precursor to the restoration of unity and mission in God through the Spirit at Pentecost. Some theologians suggest that the gifts of the spirit mentioned in Isaiah 11.1-2 are the same gifts given to the apostles from the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. These gifts of the Spirit are referred to in 1 Corinthians 12.4-11 and the fruits of the Spirit are listed in Galatians 5.22-25.

Genesis 11.6-9 (abridged version)

<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Isaiah 11.1-2

<sup>11</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup> The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Acts 2.1-13

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

<sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

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<sup>1</sup> This comes from Leviticus 23.16, which instructs people to count seven weeks or "fifty days" from the end of Passover to the beginning of the next holiday in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture.



1 Corinthians 12.4-11

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

<sup>8</sup> To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Galatians 5.22-25

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

### **The Context and Meaning of Pentecost**

Pentecost was an event, but the actual experience was transcendental, making an abstract depiction of Pentecost very compelling to an artist, which we shall see in the second of our choice of paintings. Traditionally, Pentecost is portrayed as a dove and/or with tongues of fire above the disciples' heads.

Jesus could have eaten his last supper on his own and the Spirit could have descended upon the disciples when they were alone. While there are times when the Holy Spirit touches us as individuals, the fact that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were given to a gathering of believers is not incidental. It underpins the centrality of the Church in God's work in the world. The Church's mission is not an addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its visible expression: in its whole being and in all its members, the Church is sent to proclaim, bear witness, make present, and spread the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Pentecost is the new covenant between Christians and Jesus that fulfils the old Mosaic Covenant at Mount Sinai. It reveals a similar theophany (appearance by God) in the form of wind and fire, and is the New Testament resolution of the Tower of Babel story in Genesis, where the pre-Israelites were separated by language and confusion into different nations. So Pentecost turns this Babel story around, and unites everyone on a mission from God that would have no linguistic barriers, a mission that would stretch to all four corners of the earth.

In our exciting reading from Acts we have nothing short of a Hollywood movie but clearly on a very tight budget. What we have is a violent wind, tongues of fire, a smoky mist, a moon of blood and many different languages spoken and understood. Nobody is imagining it, nobody's drunk or stoned, it's 9 o'clock in the morning – everything is normal. Well relatively speaking...

Jesus needed to send the Holy Spirit because his own disciples could not understand his teachings or read the signs he had predicted while he was still with them. So how on earth would they cope when he was gone? This dove from above that dive-bombed into their lives at Pentecost has remained with all believers ever since. Not as tongues of fire or anything visible, but then dove-tailing is a delicate business. To dove-tail into our inner lives, we need to accept the Spirit into the depths of our hearts rather than just above our heads.

## PENTECOST



**Fra Angelico - The Ascension of Christ, The Last Judgment, Pentecost (Corsini Triptych). 1447-1448.**

**Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.**

<https://www.barberinicorsini.org/en/opera/triptych-ascension-last-judgment-pentecost/>



Two details of the Pentecost panel.

### **Meditation on the painting**

Fra Angelico was an exceptional artist of the Early Renaissance and a Dominican friar. This painting combines three biblical events. On the left, Christ ascends into heaven over the heads of the Virgin Mary and the Apostles. On the right, a foreshortened dove – the Holy Spirit – descends to earth at Pentecost. The story culminates in the central panel with Christ passing judgment over the living and the dead. He is saving good people on the left, separated and divided from the wicked people condemned to the right. The damned are cowering from terrifying devils dressed in black, yellow and red who attack these poor souls with claws and whips. Amid this horror, angels embrace the blessed.

This small devotional triptych (a painting with three parts) would have been painted for a cultivated individual, probably a deacon, priest, or bishop in Rome who would have appreciated its connections and communications between heaven and earth. As a Dominican friar, Fra Angelico, wanted to present Jesus' Paschal Mystery (passion, death, resurrection and ascension), made possible because of the promise of Pentecost, in one doctrinal scene.

In uniting three events in the life of Christ and in the life of the apostles as well as believers everywhere today, Fra Angelico invites us to reflect on who Christ is in our own faith. It is God's will to enable the Holy Spirit to nourish us through the power of grace, and this grace is freely available to us all. Do we accept this grace or do we reject it? In contemplating this scene, we are invited to stand with Christ.

In the Ascension panel on our far left, the gold work around the body of Christ is staggering. As you slowly move your eyes around, you see the light catching the gold and literally radiating and shimmering around the image of Christ. He is dazzling in front of us as he ascends on his cloud. Mary appears in the centre of this ascension group as she does in the Pentecost panel. In both cases, she is looking out towards us, as she becomes our spiritual mother from this moment on, while the apostles are all looking in different directions.

The image of Pentecost continues the harmony of colours. The dove hovers and the fire of the Holy Spirit descends upon each of them seen in the red of their haloes, but what are they looking at below? Peter, in the bottom centre of the huddle is filled with conviction, speaking to the assembly of men underneath. We find his discourse in Acts 2.14-47. He has one hand pointing up to the dove, the Holy Spirit, and one pointing down to inspire the people to turn to God. It is delightful to see the artist provide such detail on the clothing on the man on the left. Although outside the upper room, he is listening attentively to Peter. The lace work on the bottom of his black garments, and his quirky red shoes are the height of Florentine fashion.

Christ the Judge divides the painted panel into two perfect halves with Ascension and Pentecost as the pivots of both his life in God and in the Spirit. Will we say yes this Pentecost and be renewed by this same Spirit?

### **Questions for reflection**

What strikes you most about this painting?

How can Pentecost deepen your confidence in Christ?

### **Closing prayer**

Come, Holy Spirit,  
fill the hearts of your faithful  
and kindle in them the fire of your love.  
Amen.





**Edgardo De Guzman, Pentecost, 2014.**

<http://www.touchtalent.com/portfolio/ed-de-guzman/religious-painting-524118>

'This painting was created after the Lenten season,  
the inspiration came instantly, and I painted it on a special paper.

This is the time God says that:  
"in the last days I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh.  
I will work wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below".

Acts 2.17 – 21

Edgardo De Guzman - 2014



### **Meditation on the painting**

Any interpretations of Pentecost that enable us to appreciate the more elusive qualities of the Holy Spirit by minimising any tangible elements, encourage us to remember the transcendental nature of the experience.

This wonderful modern painting by the artist Edgardo de Guzman does exactly that. He creates that sense of energy and inspiration that we can only imagine must have been heard, seen and felt by the apostles and those early believers in Acts 2.1-13. The Spirit blows where it will. In this painting, the Spirit is dynamic because it has this complete freedom.

The Holy Spirit is the creative breath by which the world is impelled towards perfection. Our lives are transformed if we receive the Spirit with an open heart and with open hands. We burn with delight, not superficial delight, but the delight of one who is loved by God, who experiences this love, and who in return loves God. For Christ wants our hearts to be on fire - that is why the Holy Spirit came first as fire.

While it is quite easy to see the odd hand, and flame of fire on seven heads, if you look carefully amid the vibrant colours and shapes, you can also detect a dove transposed onto the central interlocking sections. It is dancing and flying because how can this bird keep still? This is a holy party of the highest order! Guzman has conveyed the movement of the Spirit as it moves and breathes into the life and hearts of the apostles. With very few straight lines to pin the Holy Spirit down – what we see are curves and arcs in counterpoise and balance.

This artist's palette flickers and wavers between a sunrise of yellows and oranges, pinks and burgundies, blues and greens, maroons and browns, but very few reds. In spite of this colour-fest, there is an ordered structure to this picture. This Pentecost is harmonious and rooted. If we are faithful to God, the Spirit will keep us anchored.

Pentecost is a feast of great hope as well as an insurance policy for our slowness and hesitancy. The new law of Christ is written today, not on cold tablets of stone, but is engraved in our hearts. This law is the law of love and grace. When we pray to the Holy Spirit we ask for this love and grace.

So this Pentecost, let us have the courage to welcome the Holy Spirit once again into our homes and into our lives. May we travel anew with the Spirit, no matter how daring or fiery the journey.

### **Questions for reflection**

What strikes you most about this painting?

How can this interpretation enrich your understanding of the Holy Spirit?

### **Closing prayer**

Come, Holy Spirit,  
Renew your wonders  
in this our day  
as by a new Pentecost.  
Amen.



## The God who Speaks: The Year of the Word

*The God who Speaks* is an exciting initiative between Bible Society and the Catholic Church which focuses on celebrating, living and sharing God's word throughout England and Wales.

### Our Vision

Scripture is foundational to the life of the Catholic Church and so we want to enable deeper Scriptural engagement in every diocese.

We want to create new and renewed encounters with Christ through the Scriptures. We want to achieve transformation in the faith and life of our Church and in the public arena through evangelisation, education, creative arts and social action.

### Our Themes

- a) **Celebrating God's Word** – enriching our worshipping and spiritual community.
- b) **Living God's Word** – enriching our social action and outreach.
- c) **Sharing God's Word** – enriching our formation, proclamation and evangelisation.

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For more information about this Scripture initiative go to [godwhospeaks.uk](http://godwhospeaks.uk)

