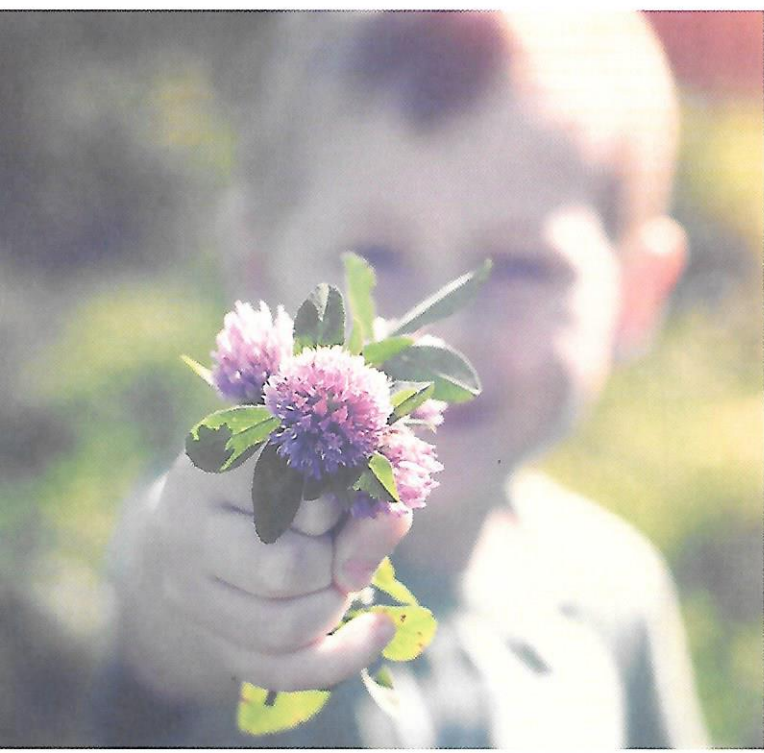


# A gift freely given



Julian Smith *reflects on* Romans 13:8-end

The novelist Charles Dickens was preoccupied by debt. Perhaps it was the experience of seeing his father in a debtors' prison, but whatever the cause, money and debt are recurring themes in his books. Is Paul's advice to "owe no one anything" the result of his experience? The change from a trusted member of the Jewish elite to an itinerant preacher must have been financially uncertain.

Paul qualifies his advice to "owe no one anything" by adding "except to love one another". This is the heart of Paul's experience, for he has been overwhelmed by God's love and his life transformed. Paul acknowledges that love fulfils

the Law, but his experience takes us further.

God's love is freely given, not earned or deserved, a gift of God's grace. Part of our response to God's love is to love one another, in obedience to Jesus' command to "Love your neighbour as yourself." But often loving our neighbour is far easier than loving oneself. We carry round hurts and regrets that misshape us, that stand in the way of receiving God's love and properly sharing it with others. We mistake sympathy for love, because we haven't allowed God to transform our lives with love and so heal our hurts.

God sees in us what God saw in Paul – huge potential waiting to be transformed by love. 🌸

**Lord, you call us to love one another as we love ourselves. Give us grace to see you in other people and to see ourselves as you see us. Open our hearts to your transforming love, that we may find healing and peace. Amen.**

## Back to university

by Tabitha Francis

*At the age of twenty-six Tabitha has gone back to university to study medicine. She shares her experience with us.*

Two weeks into my course and many areas of my life have changed quite drastically. Everyone knows that university isn't easy on the purse strings, so, being fortunate enough to have parents who live close to campus, I have moved back home with

them. God has blessed me with parents who have always supported and loved me so the thought of going back to live with them wasn't daunting, although the small changes are still noticeable and take some adapting to.

My shower routine has had to change, the food in the fridge is different, there are different conflicts in TV choices, and the house is in the middle of a city, bringing more noise than I was used to in the quiet town I used to live in.

Once again, my prayers are that I will get used to, and enjoy, the changes and challenges that I am facing. 🌸

“O Love! thou makest all things even / In earth or heaven; / Finding thy way through prison bars / Up to the stars.”

Sarah Flower Adams (1805-1848), poet and hymn writer

## Hymn writers

### Sarah Flower Adams

by Caroline Hodgson

Sarah lived from 1805 to 1848. She came from a long line of radicals, dissenters and rebels. As a girl she became friends with the young poet Robert Browning, and the two discussed their religious doubts together. At eighteen she broke the female record for climbing Ben Lomond, but in 1829 her health started

to fail, eventually forcing her to give up a promising acting career.

Her best-known hymn "Nearer, My God, to Thee", is based on the story of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:11-19, and was allegedly played as the Titanic went down. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given her idealistic roots and her own thwarted aspirations, the hymn conveys a sense of restless searching in the dark – looking for a way up and out of the mundane, towards the light: "Though like the wanderer / The sun gone down, / Darkness be over me, / My rest a stone. / Yet in my dreams I'd be / Nearer my God, to Thee." 🌸