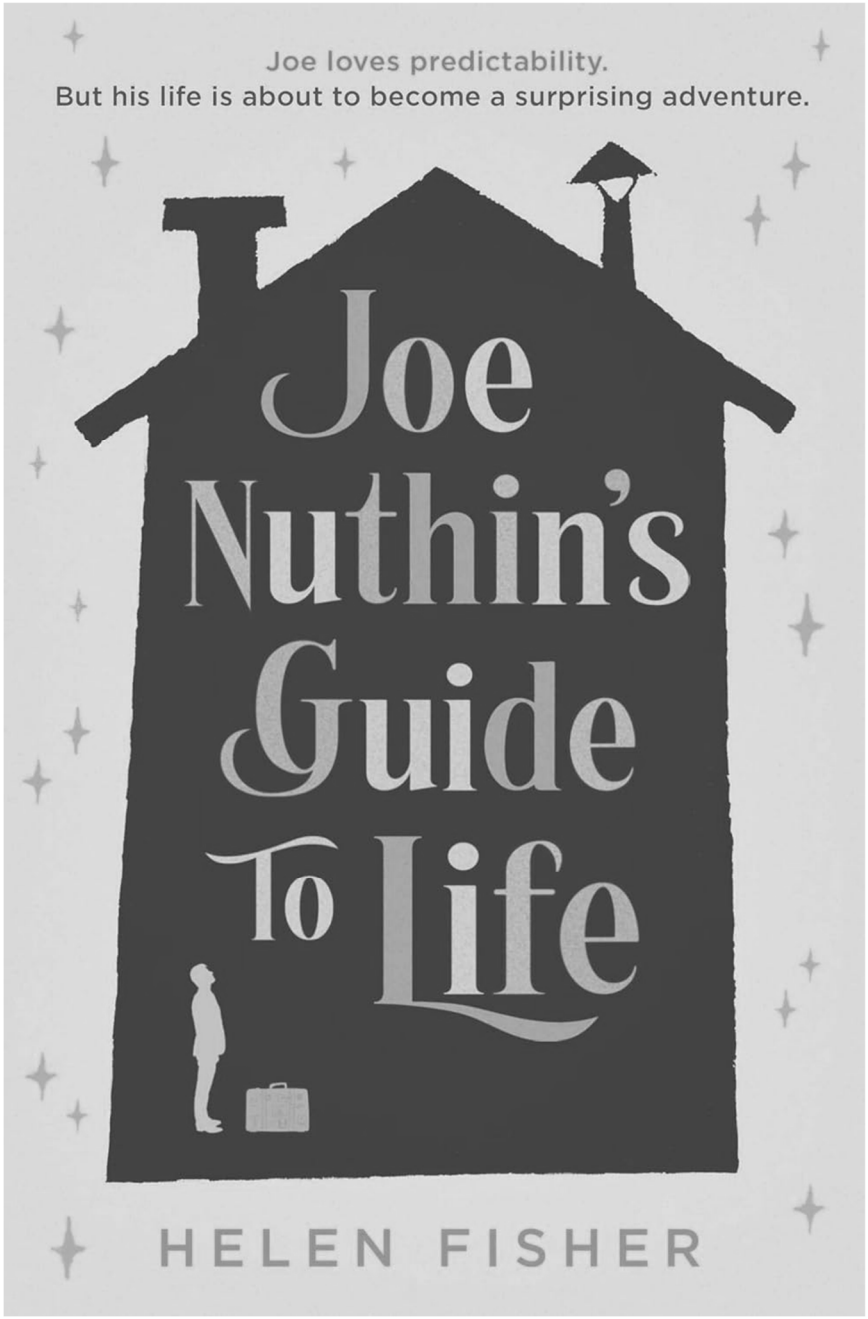

All Saints, High Wycombe
Lent Book Group 2026

Week 1: read pages 1 – 84. *Before the meeting!*
Thursday 19th February / Monday 23rd February

1. "Joe-Nathan's mum, Janet, always told him he didn't have a mean bone in his body, and he was thinking this as he wheeled a trolley of go-backs around the store… Joe liked to think that if he were displaced, someone would do the same for him." (3) **How can we help people feel like they belong?**

2. "Joe loved the epitaphs… 'I suppose that at the end of a life, after all of the lovely words have been said in the eulogy, people tend to whittle down the lives of others into a few words; maybe a sentence or two. They are words that tell the world how they should be remembered.'" (9) **What would your epitaph be?**

3. Joe suggests about janet's epitaph "should say something about how lovely and clean [she] keeps the house," and also about love and her "very nice packed lunches." (10) **What does it mean to be *seen* and appreciated?**

4. "'I know, but sometimes we just have to do things that make us feel a bit uncomfortable, if other people's needs are greater.'" (23) **Is this always possible? How does this idea fit within the gospel?**

5. "'I thought *you* would be next,' said Joe, looking at Hazel, and Mike put his head in his hands and half-laughed. Which Joe remembered later, because in fact, it was his dad, Mike, it was next." (29)
   "The delay in their knowledge took the decision-making out of their hands, and that suited Janet just fine, because this was a dreamed-about baby; A baby they thought could never be." (46-7)
   What do you do or think or feel about life's mysteries and chances?

6. "Jeff felt something; he wasn't very offended or disappointed or confused, but he felt *something* that he couldn't find a word for; something that was a diluted mix of those three things." (36)
   What choices do we make when we *see* people?

7. "'He always does this,' said Janet... 'Shakes everyone's hand. Wants everyone to feel welcome.'" (50) **How do we make people feel welcome? Do we make everyone feel welcome?**

8. "Janet flushed at the thought of her conversation with Lucy earlier; The sharing of a desire to want time to herself, the suggestion of a whole day and night away. The guilt warmed her neck, even though she knew she had nothing to feel guilty about." (75-6) **What should we do with guilt?**

Week 2: read pages 85-172
Monday 2nd March / Thursday 5th March

1. "Sixty soaps had been used since Joe's dad had died… It was a lot of stickers, a lot of soaps. A long time to miss a person." (20) **How do you measure time and loss?**

2. "'Your mum has died.' Joe had seen enough television and heard enough stories to know that here were words that signified not just *something* new, not just a change, but *everything* new; *everything* changed." (89) **What have been the events that have rocked your life?**

3. "Joe was at ease with the comfort of his known world: understanding the now; understanding the next. Sometimes he would think ahead a little, maybe to the evening, but there was no real point; it would come when it came and he knew what it would involve when he got." (93) **Is this what it means to not worry about tomorrow, to live in the now?**

4. "'It's called a heart attack.'… These words lay on the table in front of Joe, like sheets of paper being placed on top of one another, one at a time… He heard the words and understood them. But they were a safe distance away. There, on the table words he could revisit and replay, but not feel. It was information and he understood it, but it hadn't touched him yet." (99-100) **What do you do with such words?**

5. “Iris said, ‘first time you come in here, I’ll learn your name; second time you come in here, I'll *remember* your name. People like Janet understood the importance of that and she made sure her son knew the importance of that too.’” (104) **Do we work as hard as Iris and Janet in seeing people and learning who they are?**

6. “When someone dies, lots of people expect you to act a certain way; they can expect you to cry a lot, for example. But people feel and experience grief in many different ways, so don't feel that you have to cry… Whatever you are feeling is all right, there is no right or wrong.” (117) **How do you respond to another's expectation on your emotion / grief?**

7. “He had always felt that coming home was a lovely moment, a gentle, calming feeling unlike any other. He had linked that feeling with simply *coming home*, but it didn't feel the same now and he concluded that it must have been coming home to his *mum* that had brought that feeling; this in turn made him wonder if coming home would ever feel that special again.” (125) **What makes home *home*?**

8. “‘Trust me,’ said Charlie, getting very close to Joe's face. ‘You are the last person on the face of the fucking earth who can help me.’” (141) **How do you love someone who doesn't want you to?**

Week 3: read pages 173- 254.
Monday 9th March / Thursday 12th March.

1. "'He does this,' said Chloe with a shrug. 'He makes you think. It's very fucking annoying.'" (154) **Do you have friends who make you think?**

2. "Joe put his lunch box in the empty fridge (which smelled slightly of Dettol) and sat down at one of the tables. He did everything slowly, feeling the value in it all. He closed his eyes and listened to the tiny sounds and non-sounds in the room." (166) **How often do we rush and not recognise the value in the small things?**

3. "Joe thought of the yellow book. This visit, this encounter, was nothing like his mum had described." (182) **When did you last step outside your comfort zone?**

4. "'Help with what?' asked Chloe. 'I mean, yeah, the guy could use some work on his social skills. But *whatever* is going on with Charlie, it's got nothing to do with you; it's not your job. Let someone else help him. Let him help his fucking self. You, my friend, are not the man to help him.' 'But what if you are wrong?' replied Joe." (195) **Whose 'job' is it?**

5. "Joe brought out a frustration in him that Charlie couldn't contain or explain. Every time he spoke to the man he wanted to lash out. He had a face he wanted to punch; he couldn't comprehend how a person could have so many obvious problems and get away with seeming so happy… So why, *why*, did the guy get under his skin?" (201) **How would you answer Charlie's question? And then think, when have you being as frustrated as Charlie with someone else?**

6. “Joe was aware that there was only one day that could ever be ‘the day before my mum's funeral’; Joe wanted to pay attention to that too. For the same reason, he also liked to pay attention to exact times on the clock… Joe felt sorry for the 4.44s and the 9.03s, was true to them whenever he could be.” (229) **What should we pay more attention to and to what should we give less attention?**

7. “‘I think he is in trouble, and friend should be there for you when you are in trouble. And I do not think there is anyone there for him,’ said Joe, and imagined his mum replying, ‘When are you going to help him?’” (236) **Do you have conversations in your head with people you have known and loved?**

8. “Joe was so uncomfortable with all the things that were different and unexpected and stuck to him that he felt dizzily trapped inside his own discomfort. But when he looked at Charlie and saw his pain, and the tears drying on his face, a door in that trap opened and Joe felt a rush of something that he did not know was called empathy. It was a hint of the way he felt sorry for the go backs before they were returned to their rightful place, but it was more than that; stronger, deeper, fuller, as though it were happening to Joe himself and not to Charlie.” (253-4) **What are your thoughts about Joe's experience?**

Week 4: read pages 255-338.
Monday 16th March / Thursday 19th March.

1. "The coffin was at the front… How could she not be *here* when she was *so here* that if only he hadn't been told that she died, he could easily imagine her alive somewhere in the world. How could she definitely be dead (which was such a final thing), when he was also easily able to forget – for long, solid seconds – that she had died, and start talking to her as though she were standing right next to him?" (265) **How would you respond?**

2. "'Are you mean on purpose?' asked Joe.
   'I don't know. Yeah, I guess,' replied Charlie.
   'Why?'
   'Don't know.' (272)
   As readers, we suspect we know the answer. But would we know if we were asked, 'are you mean/kind/abrupt/sarcastic on purpose? Why?'?

3. "Chloe felt small. She felt as though she had read a book, missed an important chapter and made her assumptions without that missing piece of information…. *So* self-righteous, so *knowing* and apparently so fucking wrong." (285-6) **We can all relate to Chloe's experience of assumptions:Think for a moment on any gospel story and how assumptions might be at play.**

4. On the day of janet's funeral, "each piece of cereal in his bowl seemed to sing out and be defined individually rather than as a collective, proudly knowing that it was fulfilling its destiny on a special day in Joe's life." (255)
   On the morning after the funeral, "the serial looked quite normal in the bowl and the pattern on the crockery didn't stand out in any unusual way." (292)
   On 'special' days, the brain remembers or forgets strange things: what has stood out for you?

5. “Nothing could spoil the ordinariness of his day.” (308) **Do you appreciate the ordinary?**

6. “‘Why do you sound so dumb most of the time and then say something that makes you sound like a university professor? asked Charlie.
   ‘I do not know,’ said Joe. ‘Why do you sometimes act mean and sometimes act nice?’” (316-7)
   If you were a friend of yours, what would you ask yourself?

7. “‘I *think*,’ said Charlie, ‘that I might be better off working on my happy soul.’” (319) **What is a happy soul? What would one look like?**

8. Joe “was buoyed and drew reassurance about dealing with the *new thing* by the consistency of his normal life; it was a bedrock and a safety net; a reliable place that was there like the bass note in a song.” (323)
   “Joe nodded and decided that here was a new thing: this drink, this tonic, like all new things, was going to make him feel uncomfortable until he got used to it, so he took another tiny taste, and then another, and another, until gradually, but surprisingly quickly, he found that he wasn't scowling with every sip of it.” (335-6)
   How do you approach the new things?

Week 5: read pages 339-end.
Monday 23rd March / Thursday 26th March.

1. "'When you do *new things* often enough, they become *old things*,' Joe said.
   'True,' said Charlie, but Joe could hardly hear him. 'Just don't sit still, Joe, keep challenging yourself.'" (368)
   Are you sitting still?

2. "The one where Charlie dies." (369) **I don't know about you but this title set my heart racing!**

3. "Joe wondered how many kinds of smiles actually existed, because it was a lot. You could basically think anything and smile at the same time so the possibilities were only limited by the number of thoughts that a person could have." (395) **How does this idea affect how we approach scripture? Or any text for that matter?**

4. "'Charlie is a go-back, but he does not belong anywhere,' said Joe.
   'Some people take longer than others to work out where they belong,' said Tom, nodding." (408)
   What might be do to help others work out where they belong?

5. "'Sometimes the place we belong is just about the people in our lives, not the actual place. Sometimes the *place* we belong is just the place where the people who love us hang out.' Chloe shrugged. 'And if it feels like no one loves you, then you just got to keep looking.'" (411-412) **Is All Saints a place where people who love others hang out?**

6. "Chloe realised that somehow janet's advice was relevant to pretty much every part of her own life, and so, she read the book cover to cover." (416) **What is the best advice someone ever gave you? What advice would you give to somebody else?**

7. "Joe was a happy man. A man who had the best kind of nothing, and the best kind of everything:no mean bones, and six good friends." (419) **Can you think by the better definition of happy?**

8. "She would never undo him, wouldn't change him, would never take away any of the things that made him exactly the person he was, even if there had been a choice in the matter. Joe was wonderful. People didn't understand the joy he had brought them both, and the joy he brought others. Not until they experienced it for themselves." (47) **This quote is from chapter 10. Janet's wisdom undermines our assumptions: it is easy to see how this applies to others; this is also how God sees you. at the end of this book, how is Joe-Nathan opened your understanding of how you see and how you are seen?**