



the Bible for a change

Foreword by Rt Revd David Wilbourne

Edited by Nathan Eddy



MONARCH
BOOKS

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The International Bible Reading Association's scheme of readings is listed monthly on the IBRA website at www.ibraglobal.org and the full scheme for 2020 may be downloaded in English, Spanish and French.

Contents

<i>Foreword by Rt Revd David Wilbourne</i>	v
<i>How to use Fresh From the Word</i>	vi
<i>Introduction from the Editor</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements and abbreviations</i>	viii
Against the grain: looking again at familiar stories <i>Jane Gonzalez</i>	1
Epiphany: light to the nations	
1 Stars and the blues <i>Jane Gonzalez</i>	5
2 The mystery revealed <i>Revd Sham P. Thomas</i>	12
The Gospel of Matthew (1)	
1 Salt of the earth <i>Revd Norman Francis</i>	19
2 Praying and fasting <i>Simeí Monteiro</i>	26
Dealing with disappointment <i>Edna Hutchings</i>	34
Song of Solomon <i>Anthony Loke</i>	41
1 and 2 Peter	
1 Strangers in the world <i>Catrin Harland-Davies</i>	48
2 God's provision <i>Catrin Harland-Davies</i>	55
The responsibilities we share	
1 Fresh start <i>Lynne Frith</i>	58
2 Living planet <i>Terry Lester</i>	62
3 Building a community <i>Rt Revd Dr Peter Langerman</i>	69
4 Life in community <i>Wayne Hawkins</i>	76
5 Bearing the burden <i>Noel Irwin</i>	83
The Passion with Matthew	
1 Stories and questions <i>Bruce Jenneker</i>	90
2 The holy city <i>Kat Brealey</i>	97
Easter: with the rising of the sun	
1 Break of day <i>Joshua Taylor</i>	104
2 Rising early <i>Carla A. Grosch-Miller</i>	111
1 and 2 Thessalonians	
1 The labour of love <i>John Proctor</i>	118
2 Do not be shaken <i>John Proctor</i>	125
On the road	
1 First steps <i>Jan Sutch Pickard</i>	132
2 Walking with Jesus <i>Barbara Easton</i>	139
3 The journey of faith <i>Karen Francis</i>	146
Fire in the Bible	
1 God and fire <i>Vinod Shemron</i>	153
2 The power of fire <i>Shirlyn Toppin</i>	160
The Gospel of Matthew (2)	
1 Ask, see, knock <i>Michael Jagessar</i>	167
2 The storm and the sword <i>Tim Yau</i>	174

20:20 vision <i>Raj Patta</i>	181
Readings in Numbers	
1 Travelling through the wilderness <i>Mark Scarlata</i>	188
2 Testing times <i>Carla A. Grosch-Miller</i>	195
3 Balaam and his ass <i>Viv Randles</i>	202
Running the race: the Bible at the Olympics	
1 Renewed in spirit <i>Delroy Hall</i>	209
2 The nations as one <i>Liz Clutterbuck</i>	218
The Bible at the beach	
1 Resting <i>Catherine Williams</i>	225
2 At the beach <i>John Birch</i>	232
Romans 9–16	
1 God's faithfulness <i>Revd Dr Sham P. Thomas</i>	239
Different gifts <i>Yvonne Dawkins</i>	246
Welcome one another <i>Clare Nonhebel</i>	253
Fake news and the Good News	
1 Fake news <i>Deseta Davis</i>	260
2 Good news <i>Dafne Plou</i>	267
The Gospel of Matthew (3)	
1 Resting with Jesus <i>Erice Fairbrother</i>	274
2 You are the Messiah <i>Pete Wheeler</i>	281
3 The greatest commandment <i>Edel McClean</i>	288
The heavens declare	
1 The beginning <i>Heather Prince and Andrew Kruger</i>	295
2 The ending <i>Alesana Fosi Pala'amo</i>	302
The Bible on the world stage <i>Helen Van Koevering</i>	309
Jeremiah	
1 A call to pluck up and to break down <i>Stephen Willey</i>	316
2 Jeremiah's tribulations <i>Bola Iduoze</i>	323
Glimmers of hope <i>Nathan Eddy</i>	330
Trumpet calls and whispers: encountering the holy in Advent	
1 Trumpet calls <i>Catherine Williams</i>	337
2 Whispers <i>Paul Nicholson SJ</i>	344
3 Encountering the holy <i>Ann Conway-Jones</i>	351
The Word became flesh: Christmas with John	
1 In the beginning was the Word <i>Kate Hughes</i>	358
2 God's greatest gift <i>Kate Hughes</i>	365

Foreword



In 1881, just one year before the International Bible Reading Association was founded, Christopher Wordsworth, Bishop of Lincoln, published *The Four Gospels*. A signed copy of his ancient leather-bound commentary fell into my hands when I was a teenager, and has been my constant companion ever since, offering insight and inspiration behind every Gospel verse. It is a conservative work, immune to the fads and fashions of radical scholarship that were yet to dawn. Its strength is a meticulous knowledge of the original Greek in which the Gospels were written, combined with an equally deep knowledge of Christian history and the faith born afresh in successive generations. Whenever I scratch my head about what to preach or teach, I have only to turn to this book for Christ's light to dawn. For instance, did you know that most weddings at the time of Jesus took place on the third day, because that was the only day in the Genesis schemata of creation when God performed a double creation? 'On the third day a wedding took place ...' in John 2:1, besides alluding to the ultimate Third Day, accurately catches a contemporary custom, proving John's historical veracity.

A more modern favourite is Jonathan Magonet's *Bible Lives*, written by a rabbi who, though mindful of critical scholarship, is keen to give colour to the scriptural text itself and promote the message. For instance, noting the similarity of two Hebrew words, he argues that David didn't sling his stone at Goliath's forehead (Hebrew: *meitzach*). Instead he targeted his knee (Hebrew: *mitzchat*), where there would have been a necessary chink in his armour to allow movement. Goliath then fell forward and, paralysed by the heavy armour, David was able to finish him off. Magonet's interpretation gives additional sense and force to the story.

Christians are sometimes called the 'people of the book', along with Jews and Muslims, but truly the Bible is the 'book of the people', charting the right turnings and the wrong turnings, the soul-searching highs and the soul-denying lows of the people of God. We need to enter into their story imaginatively to make it our story, to learn from their successes and failures to chart our journey, and so feel our hearts burning within us as Christ travels along our own road. People like Wordsworth and Magonet have so helped bring the Bible alive for me, and I am confident that the excellent range of writers of *Fresh from the Word* will do the same for you.

Rt Revd David Wilbourne

How to use *Fresh From the Word*

How do you approach the idea of regular Bible reading? It may help to see daily Bible reading as spiritual exploration. Here is a suggestion of a pattern to follow that may help you develop the discipline but free up your mind and heart to respond.

- Before you read, take a few moments – the time it takes to say the Lord’s Prayer – to imagine God looking at you with love. Feel yourself enfolded in that gaze. Come to scripture with your feet firmly planted.
- Read the passage slowly before you turn to the notes. Be curious. The Bible was written over a period of nearly 1,000 years, over 2,000 years ago. There is always something to learn. Read and reread.
- If you have access to a study Bible, pay attention to any echoes of the passage you are reading in other parts of the biblical book. A word might be used in different ways by different biblical authors. Where in the story of the book are you reading? What will happen next?
- ‘Read’ yourself as you read the story. Be attentive to your reactions – even trivial ones. What is drawing you into the story? What is repelling you? Observe yourself ‘sidelong’ as you read as if you were watching a wild animal in the forest; be still, observant and expectant.
- What in scripture or in the notes is drawing you forward in hope? What is closing you down? Notice where the Spirit of Life is present, and where negative spirits are too. Follow where life is leading. God always leads into life, even if the way feels risky.
- Lift up the world and aspects of your life to God. What would you like to share with God? What is God seeking to share with you?
- Finally, the † symbol is an invitation to pray a prayer that has been written for the day’s reading. You are invited to say these words aloud or in silence with thousands of other readers around the world who will be reading these notes on the same day in dozens of languages.

Introduction from the editor

The election of Donald Trump as US president four years ago, the recent Brexit debate in the UK, and popular movements in Europe and the Middle East all underscore the changing times we live in. It truly feels as though the tectonic plates that balance world power are shifting beneath us. In this book of IBRA devotions, we don't consider these political issues head on. Publishing as far in advance as we do, we aren't able to, even if that were our aim. Instead, we take a step back and consider the times we live in from a wider theological perspective.

Our Lenten theme this year approaches the changes in the world in this way. The theme of 'The responsibilities we share' looks at our role as people of faith and committed citizens, regardless of where we live. And the theme 'The Bible on the world stage' coincides with the US election in 2020, inviting us to think through leadership from a Christian perspective with figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Theresa, and Desmond Tutu. In a week entitled 'Fake news and the Good News' we consider the Bible alongside social media and the wider media scene.

Beyond these themes, *Fresh From The Word 2020* offers a diverse feast of creative and close readings of the Bible. Themes include coping with disappointment, 'On the road', the image of fire in the Bible, the Bible at the Olympics to coincide with the Tokyo games in July, approaching 'the holy' in Advent, and even an exploration of cosmic themes to mark NASA's Mars rover mission, which is scheduled to blast off in July. We look at the theme of light in Epiphany and 20:20 vision in the year 2020. And we feature continuous readings of the Gospel of Matthew, the Song of Solomon, Romans 9–16, Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and 1 and 2 Peter.

As in previous years, we feature creative and faithful writers from around the world. This year we have entries from South Africa, India, Argentina, Brazil, Nigeria, Samoa, the US, the Caribbean and elsewhere, as well representing a spread of regions and churches within the UK.

However, the primary work of IBRA is not in publishing, writing or editing, but rather in the daily reading of scripture. This has been our aim and organising principle since our founding more than 135 years ago. Each day we commit to reading the same scripture together wherever we live. We do this in good times and uncertain ones, praying that God will work through our resolve and commitment. May God work through us in the year ahead as well.

Yours in Christ,

Nathan



Acknowledgements and abbreviations

The use of the letters a or b in a text reference, such as Luke 9:37–43a, indicates that the day’s text starts or finishes midway through a verse, usually at a break such as the end of a sentence. Not all Bible versions will indicate such divisions.

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Against the grain: looking again at familiar stories

Notes by **Jane Gonzalez**



Jane is a Roman Catholic laywoman. She is finishing a doctorate in Pastoral Theology, looking at new approaches to adult faith formation. She occasionally reviews the Sunday papers from a Christian perspective. She and her husband have a share in a narrowboat and spend four weeks of the year enjoying the quiet pleasures of life on the canals of England. Other leisure activities include gardening, golf and reading. Jane has used the NRSVCE for these notes.

Wednesday 1 January Going the extra mile ...

Read Luke 10:25–37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?'

(verses 25–26)

I wonder if the disciples of Jesus ever got frustrated with his seeming reluctance to respond to a query with a straightforward answer? Often he replies to a question with a question of his own or tells a story in response. He seems to be asking us to work things out for ourselves. It is up to us as enquirer or reader to come up with and act upon the answer.

As we begin a new year of reflecting on and praying with scripture, maybe it is time for us to ponder the lawyer's question, 'What do you read there?' We all have our favourite passages and verses in the Bible and our preferred interpretations – shaped by our culture, creed and upbringing – of familiar texts. The enduring challenge of the gospel is to resist the complacency of the familiar and to look afresh and deeply at texts we think we know well. The parables are an invitation to revisit what may have become comfy and cosy. The Samaritan of the parable goes further than he needs in his compassionate response to another's distress. Is it time for us to go the extra mile in the way we read his story?

† Father, give me the courage to read your Word with fresh eyes and to listen to your teaching with attention and openness.

Thursday 2 January

The path of life**Read Psalm 23**

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
For you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.*

(verse 4)

We spend our summers in Spain, where we are privileged to own a house in the country. It's a very different environment from home ... we live near a small town where agriculture is the main source of employment. Our friends are more likely to commute to work by tractor than by train. Cecilio is one such friend. He is a shepherd who brings his flock across our fields to graze for a while before moving with them to other places of pasture. In a landscape that, in the summer, resembles a 'dry and weary land where there is no water' (Psalm 63:1), there are no lush meadows nor is there much in the way of grass. Sheep are not left to their own devices but led and guided to their food.

Cecilio knows his flock intimately – the unique character of each of them – the laggard, the adventurous, the shy ... And his flock trusts him to care for them. There may not be wolves around but there are roads and traffic to negotiate as together they criss-cross the terrain in search of grazing. Cecilio's attentive and watchful presence ensures the safety of his flock, as well as satisfying their hunger. We live in a world where shepherds have mobile phones rather than crooks. It is also a world where the 'ideals' of self-sufficiency and self-determination sometimes lead us to an over-reliance on our own resources. Is it time to reflect more deeply on how the Lord, our shepherd, knows and understands us better than any human being and to recommit ourselves to accepting more fully his loving care and concern?

† Father, give me the grace to follow you always in humility and trust and to accept the guidance you offer.

For further thought

Reflect on the many meanings of the word *humility*. Where do I need to be more grounded and more aware of my dependence on God's providence? And where do I resist his grace?

Friday 3 January

Party time ...

Read Luke 15:11–32

'... You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'

(verses 31b–32)

Franco Zefirelli's film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, remains, for me, a classic retelling of the life of Jesus. I remember being entranced by it even though, at the time, I was not a practising Christian. There was a freshness about it and an imaginative approach that I found very appealing. Zefirelli did not take too many liberties with the text but brought an artist's eye to the familiar scenes and characters. One of the most striking was his use of the parable of the Prodigal Son. He imagines Jesus going to a party at Matthew's house (where the guests are as disreputable as Matthew) and Peter's attempts to stop him. As Jesus tells the story of the reconciliation of the errant son to his father and the reaction of the older brother, we see Peter being drawn into the story and into the courtyard of the house. As Jesus utters the words of our verse, Matthew and Peter draw closer into an embrace of forgiveness and acceptance. Brother forgives and accepts brother.

Jesus finishes the story with the older brother still outside, refusing to come in and nursing his grievance. Zefirelli gives us a conclusion, a glimpse into a 'what-comes-next scenario', a happy ending. There are other possible, less palatable outcomes that we could posit – no reconciliation, a poisoning of relationships in the household, bitterness and hate. Which would we wish upon our family and ourselves? Or like the older son in the story, are we too concerned with perceived fairness or unfairness rather than the healing that forgiveness brings to both bestower and recipient?

† Father, help me to forgive those who hurt me. Give me the courage to offer the embrace of reconciliation instead of nurturing hurt and anger.

For further thought

Take some time to reflect on the Lord's Prayer. Where do I need to offer and receive forgiveness? Can I be the one to take the first step?

Saturday 4 January

The answer lies in the soil

Read Mark 4:1–20

'And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

(verse 20)

My father's pride and joy was his garden. My mother was the one adept at changing plugs and basic plumbing! His endeavours, in rain or shine, provided us with abundant vegetables and flowers throughout the year. It was hard work, however, and he often commented that the ground grew stones better than anything else. As children, he paid us a penny a bucket to shift the stones so that digging was a little easier for him. He knew that the earth had to be properly prepared if we were to have a decent return on the investment in time and effort – and pennies – when harvest time came around.

In our spiritual lives we also need to prepare the ground so that the Word can root itself in us and grow and flourish. The mulch of prayer and sacrifice, the dressing of silence and stillness – these are necessary if we are to bear fruit and produce a harvest. The spiritual equivalents of weeds, pests and bad weather – sin and apathy and life in general – may impede growth. The stones of hardship and sorrow tempt us to give up. The Lord is kind, however, and does not make demands on us that we cannot fulfil. He asks for fruitfulness but understands that not every harvest is abundant or one hundredfold; that in spite of our efforts what we produce might not be as plentiful as we wish; that there may be fallow times. He is content that we produce something; that we are diligent and attentive in our preparation and work. He will do the rest.

† Father, your grace is at work in my life. Accept the fruits of my labours and help me to be more fruitful.

For further thought

What prevents a good return in my spiritual life? What can I learn from the fallow periods or when growth is hard to discern?

Epiphany: light to the nations – 1 Stars and the blues

Notes by **Jane Gonzalez**



For Jane's biography, see p. 1. Jane has used the NRSVCE for these notes.

Sunday 5 January

The best things come in small parcels

Read Micah 5:2–4

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel.*

(verse 2a)

Each year the Christmas season seems to start earlier – the summer holidays are scarcely over and the shops are full of Santas and snowmen. The first of December sees many people putting up their tree and bedecking their houses with lights. Then, come Boxing Day, the fairy-lights disappear and darkness returns to our streets. The traditional Twelve Days of Christmas which culminated in the great feast of Epiphany are subsumed in the New Year's preoccupation with a 'dry' January and diets and gym membership, by Christians and non-Christians alike.

As we move into January, maybe it is time 'recapture' Epiphany and to delve a little deeper into its meanings and how it complements Christmas. The word actually means 'manifestation' – God revealing himself to humankind. January is a dark month, in many respects, but Epiphany encourages us to look for the light wherever it shows itself, often in the smallest and unlikeliest of places. The light of the world comes to be born in an obscure town in a small occupied country; God blazes in the darkness of human life, in the most unexpected of places and people, if only we have the eyes and the will to perceive him.

† Father, let me not be made despondent by dark days or the darkness of hardship.
Help me to seek and find your light.