Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Edited by Nathan Eddy
Foreword
by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Welcome to *Fresh From the Word*. Whether you are a new or returning reader, whether you are young or old, may God bless you and inspire your reading of the Bible this year, guided by this book.

The Bible is not some dry and dusty list of rules. It is the story of how we are created good in God’s eyes, how that goodness was damaged, and how wholeness is ours with God. Depravity came into the world through individual choices, drip by drip. The Bible is an invitation to wholeness instead of brokenness. We can choose wholeness and a life of beauty. We can choose to work for peace in the small choices that face us each day. Each of us has the dignity of these choices, whether we are rich or poor, from the global North or South, in prison or not. The Bible shows us how. It is about peace and reconciliation. It is about social justice in your neighbourhood. It is about joy and laughter.

The International Bible Reading Association has a rich history. It goes all the way back to the evangelical revival in the nineteenth century and the creation of Sunday schools and public education for all. IBRA has always been an association, not just a publisher of Bible reading notes. To be an association means we learn from one another, wherever we are in the world. We can be human only together – we have too much to learn from one another to be divided. In South Africa our word for this is ‘ubuntu’ – we are whole together, and all are diminished if one of us is diminished. We must be an association! Despite all the horrors of life I have seen in my work for reconciliation, I am still struck by how wonderful people are. We are created by God to be a blessing, and we need one another to become this. *Fresh From the Word* carries on the founding vision of IBRA for our generation to be this kind of global association for good.

In the words of the psalmist, the Bible is ‘lamp for my feet’. May the ‘Word for Today’ found in this book be a ‘Light for our Path’. I pray that this book and its writers will guide us in our efforts to make peace, and in our laughing and loving. Life is too precious for anything less.

I hope you are ready for the adventure. Day by day as you read, I hope you are aware of the gracious, peaceful, and hopeful presence of God, and are changed by it!

God bless you

Archbishop Emeritus D M Tutu
Welcome to *Fresh From the Word*, a new resource for daily Bible reading. We really do mean ‘welcome’. We aren’t just publishers – the International Bible Reading Association (IBRA) is an association of readers of the Bible around the world, in many different churches. Wherever you have come from, we are glad to share this journey with you.

For returning IBRA readers, it’s you who are welcoming me as Editor, as well. I come to *Fresh From the Word* from parish ministry, university chaplaincy, journalism and creative writing, and I’ve enjoyed working with the editorial team on this new venture.

Our mission is simple. *Fresh From the Word* aims to help you read the Bible daily. There are notes here for every day of the year, followed by prayers and questions to stimulate your imagination and prayer. You will need to have a Bible to hand to engage with the notes – the notes are meant to take you deeper into scripture, not to stand alone.

Our writers were also given the challenging brief of reaching out to new Christians, to Christians involved in social action, and to Christians involved in Fresh Expressions worship contexts – all the while maintaining the same international and ecumenical perspectives which were hallmarks of IBRA notes in recent years. I think they’ve done that – and I’ll be interested in hearing your views.

We hope this new title is familiar to returning readers, but there are new features for *Fresh From the Word*, as well. All these notes are written using the 2011 New International Version of the Bible, the bestselling English language translation. The 2011 NIV uses inclusive language where its previous incarnations did not.

One last word – you might find it interesting to visit our Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/freshfromtheword) to share your views and join discussions on notes. The site is updated regularly by me and the IBRA team and we hope you’ll join the discussion on the themes this year, including The greening spirit, Journeys, War and Peace, and God in translation.

Every blessing on your journey with these writers and, in faith, with readers around the world.

Nathan Eddy
Voices

This week’s notes are by Nathan Eddy

Nathan is editor of Fresh from the Word and minister at North Lowestoft United Reformed Church, Suffolk, UK. His poetry and prose have appeared in magazines and scripture commentaries and he has worked as a journalist near Boston, USA. Nathan’s wife Clare is a full-time Anglican vicar and they have two young daughters. After university, Nathan spent a year living in monasteries in Ghana, Israel, Egypt, India, China and Japan. He has noticed that, the less time he spends riding his mountain bike, the more money he spends on it. He is ordained in the United Church of Christ (USA).

Wednesday 1 January

A fresh start

Psalm 119:129-136

Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.
(verse 133)

Well, you’ve done it. You’ve got hold of Fresh From the Word and a Bible and you’ve started. Whether you are a new or returning reader, welcome.

Psalm 119 is a good place to begin, because this psalm shows us what a discipline like Bible reading can be. This psalm – the longest one – is written in a demanding form called ‘acrostic’: each verse begins with the same letter, in sets of eight. In new New International Version Bibles, you’ll see all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet reproduced next to their English sound. Alphabets were invented in this part of the world, the Ancient Near East. In fact, if you look at the start of the psalm, you’ll see the first two letters ‘aleph’ and ‘beth’, which are related to the English word itself, through Greek.

Reading the Bible is a discipline. It takes effort. The Bible is old and it can be strange. We are all busy. But this disciplined psalm is not grim. It is like a dance between two people who have been partners for years: direct my footsteps …

The psalmist belongs to God. There is no anxiety, just trust that God will be there. Through your disciplined reading this year, may that trust grow and grow as God directs your footsteps in your dance together.

† Lord of the dance, direct our footsteps in ways of peace and life this year, and help us persevere when we stumble.
Committed and complete

**1 John 1:1-4**

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.* (verses 3-4)

You might know the most famous passage from 1 John, the one often used at weddings: ‘God is love’ (4:8b). Like a wedding or union, the point of the opening verses of John is togetherness. The point is to be drawn together into fellowship, which will complete the joy that the writer’s community seeks. In other words, reading the Bible is good for nothing unless we are drawn into community. To be Christian means to share what you have in fellowship – as partners promise to do in a wedding ceremony!

Like all committed relationships, Christian community takes work. It can involve real pain and suffering. There are indications in this book of a painful split in John’s community. (In 2:19 we read, ‘they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us’. Ouch.) Perhaps these opening verses reflect a disagreement over Jesus – other Christians at the time believed that he only appeared to suffer, or came only as a spirit, not flesh and blood that could be seen and touched. But our author is clear: Jesus, the Word of life, was real – someone whose body and wounds could be touched.

You don’t need me to tell you that our relationships and faith communities are as fragile as Jesus’ human body. Churches, like John’s, can be torn apart. But the bonds of God’s love (the bonds that are God, according to 1 John!) are stronger even than death. In that love all creation is called into committed fellowship. And we are called to build it up, relationship by relationship – not just read about it.

† Gracious God, thank for you sharing everything you have with us. Give us your commitment and generosity to share with others, to complete your joy.

**For further thought**

- What community will you be building up this year as you read the Bible?
We will be reading a lot of the Bible this year together. In particular, we will be reading a lot of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible – Joshua, Ecclesiastes, Amos and Habbakuk, to name a few. The scriptures that Jesus was opening to his discouraged followers on the road would have been like these; the New Testament hadn’t been written yet.

As he did for those followers, Jesus helps us re-imagine the Old Testament. And the relationship works the other way, too. The Old Testament in its own right helps us understand Jesus. If you persevere in your reading of the Hebrew Bible, it will enlarge and challenge your understanding of Jesus, his teaching, and his people.

Nothing looks quite the same with the living Jesus at our side, including the Bible. The two people on that road thought their world had ended with Jesus’ death. It was only after the fact that they understood what God was up to.

About 20 years ago we had a fire in the sanctuary of my church. The organ was a write-off, and smoke damaged much of the front wall. It was awful at the time. But today, after generosity and hard work, the sanctuary feels fresh and contemporary. I’m not sure things would have changed without that fire.

At the start of a New Year we tend to think about the future. I wonder what in your past will be seen in different perspective this year as Jesus opens the scriptures among us. I wonder what part of the Bible might come alive for you – and what aspect of Jesus you might see in new light.

† Living Lord, unsettle what we think we know about you. Illuminate the scriptures again. Set our hearts alight.

For further thought

• If you have a chance to read the Bible in person with Jews or Muslims and have an open and friendly discussion, don’t hesitate. You’ll be amazed and challenged.
Saturday 4 January

**Signs of life**

John 20:30-31

*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

(verse 31)

One of the challenges of following Jesus is that he is not here physically on earth as he was in the Gospels. Christians believe that Jesus will come again – but for now we are in-between times. I wonder if the church is in-between times, too. Things are changing about the way we worship, the way we engage with young families and young adults, and the way we live out our mission in diverse societies. We are in-between times, building a church that does not fully exist.

John assures us that Jesus leads us even though absent. He has written down these signs of Jesus so that we, too, can have life in his name (verse 31) even though Jesus isn’t around in the same way. By listening to the voices we’ve looked at over the past few days – voices of discipline and trust, voices calling you to a shared life, and voices calling you to hope with a living Jesus – we can be guided by the presence of Jesus into life.

Recently a long-time member of my church died. She had been a Sunday school teacher and preacher in local churches and was an inspiration to many people. She kept all her sermons, and we read some at her funeral. Although many missed her, and felt upset, in the sermons we read we were comforted by her trust that death was not the end for her. Her words, and her presence, were in a sense still with us.

Although we live in-between times, by reading, listening and imagining together, we, too, will be led by Jesus into life. He is not anxious or afraid.

† Lead us into life, Lord of life, one sign at a time.

For further thought

- Take some space somewhere on this page to record some hopes for that life in your life this year, and for your community.
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Fresh from the Word: the Bible for a change will inspire your reading of the Bible in a changing world. Bringing together top theologians and biblical scholars, creative writers from around the world, cutting-edge church leaders, activists for peace and justice and a range of others, Fresh from the Word offers 365 sets of notes, prayers, and suggestions for action on biblical themes. This fresh approach to Bible reading is aimed at new readers of the Bible from across the Church, as well as anyone seeking a faithful, creative and challenging conversation with the Bible every day of the year.

This year’s topics range from readings in the Gospel of Matthew to human foolishness and the foolishness of God; the greening Holy Spirit; war and peace – to mark the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War; and God in translation.

Star contributors this year include: