

BRF LENT BOOK



# You Are Mine

Daily Bible readings from  
Ash Wednesday to Easter Day

DAVID WALKER

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 758 4

First published 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY.

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To Sue,  
who has journeyed with me over so many years.

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## Introduction

# In search of belonging

Welcome to this series of daily reflections for Lent. Over a number of years I have been exploring the notion of what Christian belonging means. How do we belong with God and with Jesus? And how do our human lives help or hinder us along the way?

I took up the issue because I felt it was very much underplayed. I could find lots of writing about what Christians believe and no end of (often conflicting) viewpoints on how we should behave. But all of this felt to be missing the central point. Above all, we are called, as the ancient Israelites were called long ago, to be the people of God. Before anything else our relationship is one of belonging. And that cannot just be collapsed into a combination of the things we believe and the moral standards we subscribe to.

Along the way, I discovered four dimensions to human belonging that together seemed to me to make up a reasonably complete model. I studied them initially through a sabbatical, which then turned into a series of academic papers published in various journals, and on into the work that brought me my doctorate in 2014.

We belong, whether with God or elsewhere, through a combination of these four elements.

*Activities* are the things we do sufficiently often to have a sense of commitment that goes beyond the current instance. In Christian circles they might include attending services regularly, a routine of personal prayer and Bible study, being part of a fellowship group or serving on a church council. *Events* are the big 'one-off' things that we do, whether family celebrations, community events or the

major feasts of the Christian calendar. Alongside these, I found that we belong through our relationships with *People* and with specific *Places*. All of these can be means by which our sense of belonging with God is sustained and grown. If you are interested in the model in more detail, or in how it can be turned to practical use for a church that wants to reach out in mission, you will find lots more about it in my book *God's Belongers* (BRF, 2017). It's deliberately written not to require any of the detailed statistical analysis from the earlier academic work.

In working towards both my PhD and the later book, I was struck by how readily a model developed to understand Christian belonging in the 21st century mapped on to the stories of the Bible. Indeed, the biblical material seems to me to show a better balance between the four dimensions than many churches achieve today. So I was delighted to be invited by BRF to approach the same issue, of what it means to belong with God, from the perspective of daily devotional reflections. This current book is the fruit of that work.

Much of what I write is rooted in my own personal journey with Christ, over the 40-plus years since my faith came alive as I was preparing to go to university. I probably reveal more about my own faith and challenges here than in anything I have ever previously written. I hope that you find this personal dimension helpful. It is certainly not meant to be self-indulgent in any way, but to build on the one thing that I really know and know well: what it has meant to seek to belong with God as Father, and with Jesus Christ, over the course of a life lived predominantly in public Christian ministry.

For each week of Lent the reflections will follow a particular theme within belonging. We will begin with ten days exploring how we belong directly with God the Father and with Jesus Christ. Over successive weeks we will turn our attention to how we belong with the people who are closest to us; with the great figures of the Bible and Christian faith; with the wider community and its special places; and with the big celebrations and events of the Christian cycle and



human life. Between them these will pick up the different dimensions of belonging set out above.

This pattern will be slightly interrupted for the Sunday reflections from the second to fifth Sundays in Lent. Rather than the weekly themes, these will follow the principal gospel reading that is used on those days in many churches across a wide range of denominations. This year they are focused on a series of encounters between Jesus and particular individuals, as set out in John's gospel. Each of them has something to say to us about how we belong with and through Christ. Finally, for Holy Week we shall follow Jesus on the journey from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, discovering how to belong more closely with him on each stage of his passion and resurrection.

At times I have found writing these reflections deeply moving. I have discovered the mark of God in my life in places where previously I had not been aware of the strength of that presence. At one point I was drawn to describe the exercise of producing daily reflections as like writing a series of love letters to God. Again and again, as I have sought to look into both the scriptures and my own life, I have heard in the silence the one who assures me, ever more strongly, 'You are mine.' My hope and prayer is that you who read it will hear something of the same, not because I am saying it to you but because one who is far greater is able to speak to you through the words I have been given.

May God bless you in your Lenten discipline and give you joy and courage to complete your course. And may you ever hear him whisper those precious words of belonging in your ear: 'You are mine.'



Ash Wednesday to the end of Week 1

## BELONGING WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON

To be a Christian is to find one's primary belonging in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Every other belonging is subordinate to and consequent upon that. Even our most precious and intimate human relationships cannot compare with what it means to belong with one who knows us completely and utterly and, notwithstanding that, loves us more deeply and eternally than any other could.

For that reason, for the first ten days of Lent, from Ash Wednesday until the Saturday before the second Sunday, these daily reflections focus on different aspects of what it means, and how it feels, to belong with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We will meet the one who feeds us, teaches us, forgives us and heals us. We will engage with the creator, who is also the one who conquers evil and calls us to eternity. And we will join Jesus in his fasting and temptation.

## Ash Wednesday

# Beginning our discipline

**And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**

MARK 1:12-13

Over recent years I've become more and more aware that my relationship with God is not simply mediated through my mind and intellect but through every part of my body and each of my senses. I've discovered how the posture I adopt for praying can make a real difference, whether raising my arms towards heaven or sitting cross-legged on the floor. And I've learned to make more of icons or holy pictures as well as songs and music, in order to focus my prayer in particular directions. Touch and taste and smell have also become more important components of my spirituality. I might pray while gripping a cross or slowly eating a piece of chocolate.

Today we begin the season of Lent. I expect many of us have already made a decision about some discipline we intend to follow over these next weeks. I hope that the rhythm of reading the daily passages in this book, and setting aside time to reflect on them, will form a valuable part of that for you. I've often found Lent to be not just a time to give things up, but a time to adopt a new spiritual discipline; some have proved so beneficial that they now form part of my basic spiritual diet.

Yet I think there is still a necessary place for abstinence. Lent is also a time when we give something up. And as I have discovered the importance of my physicality and senses, I've become more aware

of the part that giving up some aspect of our normal diet can play. When Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days and nights, it wasn't that he was just too busy to spare time and energy for food and drink. More importantly, neither was it some demonstration of his willpower or his supernatural strength. I'm aware that all too easily I can go into such a spiritual discipline to prove to myself or to God that I can do it. When I do that, the focus becomes me not God, and the exercise is worthless.

Jesus knew that abstaining from physical nourishment would bring him closer to God. And that's something I have found too. For a number of years, I followed a discipline of fasting from all food for an entire day each week during Lent. The day of the week varied, so as not to affront anyone hosting me by rejecting the food they offered. But there would always be at least one or two days when I could quietly avoid food without drawing attention to myself. I found that it was possible to divert my hunger for physical sustenance into a hunger for God. When my stomach rumbled or I felt the desire to eat, I took it as an invitation to pray. I was able to turn to the one who can satisfy my every need, not simply the demands of my belly. It served as a reminder that, apart from God, I can never truly have my needs satisfied, nor be nourished to grow into my full self. One year I offered to pray for anyone else who let me know they were fasting for Lent. And I asked them to remember me in their own prayers. A number of people did just that. I'm happy to make that same offer to any of you reading this. If you want me to pray for you on a day when you are fasting, and have a Twitter account, you can contact me at @bishmanchester.

What also surprised me was that fasting not only lifted up my eyes to God but also directed my gaze outwards to his creation. We don't have to do much more than switch on the TV or radio or open a newspaper to be confronted by the number of people going hungry in this world. They may be suffering from a failed harvest due to extreme weather or other effects of climate change, or they may be people in our own nation who haven't received the benefit payments

they require in order to feed themselves and their children. Hunger surrounds us, and the discipline of fasting can help draw it to our attention. When I feel hungry myself, I just naturally become more aware of news items about hunger elsewhere. And then I can turn my prayers towards those whose stomachs are far emptier than my own, and reaffirm my commitment to supporting efforts to alleviate poverty and to reduce the negative impact of humanity on the world's climate. My prayer is both God-centred and centred on those most in need.

We tend to look at the story of Jesus fasting in the wilderness entirely through the lens of his battle with the devil. And yet when we read the story carefully, it is clear that his temptations come only towards the end of that period. For the vast majority of his time he is simply using his abstinence from food to assist him in preparing for his public ministry by building up the pattern of his own spiritual life. The devil visits him three times; God is with him far more than that. So I wish you well with your own Lenten discipline as we begin this season. May all that you take up and all that you give up draw you closer to the one in whose name you are doing it.

*Gracious God,  
 your Son Jesus prayed for 40 days in the wilderness  
 as he sought your will for his way forward.  
 Be close to us when we face hard choices,  
 especially those which have a lasting impact on our life's journey.  
 Whisper your holy word into our ears,  
 that we might hear which way to go;  
 and forgive us when our deafness sets us on another path.  
 Grant this for the sake of him who suffered, died and rose for us:  
 Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*



*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
Barnabas in Schools  
Holy Habits  
Living Faith  
Messy Church  
Parenting for Faith

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Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

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**[brf.org.uk](http://brf.org.uk)**

## How do we belong to God and with Jesus?

At this time of Lent, David Walker explores different aspects of human belonging through the medium of scripture and story, in order to help us recognise the different ways in which we are God's beloved. And as we recognise ourselves and our own lives in the narrative of God's engagement with humanity and his creation, he gently challenges us to engage for God's sake with God's world.

Week 1: Belonging with the Father and the Son

Week 2: Belonging in relationships

Week 3: Belonging with the saints

Week 4: Belonging here and there

Week 5: Belonging with celebrations and festivals

Week 6: The journey to the cross and beyond



**David Walker** is Bishop of Manchester. He is a regular broadcaster on BBC radio, including the *Daily Service* and *Sunday* programmes. His interest in Christian belonging has grown from his involvement in the Housing Association movement and his membership of the Franciscan Third Order. He is also the author of *God's Belongers* (BRF, 2017).

**'This is a wonderful companion for Lent by David Walker. It is short but deep, and engages the reader in both prayer and reflection. A perfect way to explore what it means for all of us to belong to Christ in a challenging world.'**

**Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury**



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