

Bible readings for
special times



Anxious Times

Carmel Thomason

Foreword by Archbishop John Sentamu

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Foreword

Archbishop John Sentamu

This book is to be savoured, not rushed. As an antidote to anxiety, it will repay a measured reading, just one short chapter a day.

A friend sent me a card last Christmas, with the greeting, 'I hope you are well. The world isn't.' That encapsulated what many people are feeling. Asked if he was worried about the possibility of nuclear war, Pope Francis said recently, 'I think we are at the very limit. I am really afraid of this. One accident is enough to precipitate things.'

Quite apart from our daily diet of gloomy news, there's also an unidentified uncertainty hanging in the air. The old signposts which pointed the way to faith and hope have been defaced, and frustrated hope is audible, visible and smellable. Despair is polluting our air. We are more and more reliant on inner resources to tackle the general foreboding. This book will help to replenish them.

The Bible has much to say about worry and fear, and how to cope with them. Unlike some overenthusiastic preachers, it doesn't chastise us or pump us up with spiritual steroids which insist the world will end any minute now, so there's nothing to worry about. Jesus readily acknowledged the unease that we all feel from time to time and engaged in a bit of leg-pulling to help us get through it:

'Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?'

MATTHEW 6:26-27

It is very good news that BRF recognises the need to publish some gentle and realistic Christian advice about a 21st-century virus and that Carmel Thomason has written it.

Introduction

‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.’

JOHN 14:27

As I write this, in August 2017, by many indices the world is safer than at any other time in human history. At the same time many people are living more afraid than ever before. Across Europe this year the terrorist threat has fluctuated between severe, meaning an attack is highly likely, and critical, meaning an attack is expected imminently. Everyday modes of transport are being used as weapons, and yet terrorist experts tell us we are more likely to be struck by lightning than by a terrorist’s bullet.

On first hearing that comparison, I thought, ‘I don’t know anyone who has been struck by lightning.’ The next day I read a news story about people injured by lightning strikes in France.

I don’t find these types of statistics helpful. Telling me there is a greater danger from something I never considered dangerous just gives me one more thing to worry about. Rather than putting my fear into perspective, it reinforces an underlying anxiety that the world is a dangerous place. It’s like saying, ‘What’s the worst that could happen?’ Do you want to ask another question, because I’ve got a good imagination?

Research has shown that some chronic worriers use their worry to suppress and avoid difficult emotions, protecting themselves from the impact of living and the raw feelings that can come with it. Paradoxically, in attempting to protect ourselves from feeling fear, it seems by worrying we may be making ourselves more anxious and afraid.

We all know that telling someone not to be afraid doesn’t stop them feeling afraid. We can’t think our way out of fear, and for all our 21st-century technological advances, we still can’t control every aspect of life.

There are some things, such as giant sinkholes in the road, that are clearly unsafe, but for the most part life isn’t divided so easily into safe and unsafe. Despite this,

there is a tendency to want to label everything, to sort it into categories we can recognise, even if we can't understand them. There is a sense of certainty in doing that, but it can also lead to an uncomfortable 'them and us' way of looking at the world, a dualistic, divisive way of thinking.

Even if we try to keep the unknown at arm's length, it doesn't guarantee safety. Sometimes even people close to us will let us down. Jesus was betrayed by a close friend, Judas, one of his chosen disciples. We could use that evidence to say we can't trust anyone; or we could say that Jesus had twelve disciples, so if we're weighing up risk, there's a much better chance of finding love than betrayal.

Being open to love doesn't mean being naive. We'd probably all agree it's not a good idea to walk down the street with cash hanging out of your back pocket, but there is a world of difference between living aware and retreating to a fortress. Through experience we can become cynical or we can become wise. Someone once said to me, 'In life, there's your stuff, other people's stuff and God's stuff. Don't try to carry what's not yours.' Letting go and accepting uncertainty have been huge lessons for me, and ones I continue to learn.

We like to think our anxieties are somehow different, special or more acute than those of previous generations. If that were true, why did Jesus preach so often about worry and anxiety?

Jesus' resurrection demonstrates a power that casts out fear, even of death. Unfortunately, sometimes as Christians we take Jesus' message not to be afraid and isolate it from other scriptural teachings that demonstrate practical ways to control our worry and live with confidence – ways that are only now being evidenced through science as effective in controlling anxiety.

I've come to believe that feeling afraid and being afraid are different. The week after the 9/11 terror attack in New York I travelled to the USA on a flight with rows and rows of empty seats. I was nervous about going, a fear exacerbated on my return flight when the plane's computers failed and the captain's voice came over the tannoy telling us it wasn't safe to proceed over the Atlantic so we were being diverted to New York. There will always be circumstances that cause us to feel afraid, but this doesn't need to hold us back from living our lives fully in the way that avoidance of 'being afraid' so often does.

When I was asked to write this book, it was as a response to a collective anxiety about the current global situation. I'll admit, my first thought on receiving the request was

an anxious one – how can I do this? After sitting with it for a while, I’ve done what I’ve learned to do when facing anything new or uncertain: I prayed, put my trust in God and did the best I could. I’ve shared scriptures that have supported me during times when I’ve felt anxious and worried. I’ve also shared experiences that have helped me in practical ways to let go of worry, accept living with uncertainty, trust in God and live with hope.

If you’ve picked up this book, it’s likely either you or someone you know is struggling with anxiety. My prayer is that something within these pages will resonate with you and give you genuine hope that you won’t always feel this way. A wise friend who was a prisoner of war during World War II once told me:

Peace within a person is where it all starts. It is a peace that can’t be disturbed or broken by outside events. I do hope that you will strive for that inner peace, however you find it. The actions of nations are merely the actions of men writ large and there are fewer of us left who were there to remind you of the depths to which a country can sink when hatred is allowed to fester.

As individuals, we may not be able to change the world, but we can change how we respond to the world. I pray that one by one we begin to break down the global barriers that divide us, by living with open, peaceful and fearless hearts.

MATTHEW 27:46

Comfort in the word

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’).

On the wall of a small cellar in Cologne is scratched an anonymous three-line poem:

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining.
 I believe in love, even when I feel it not.
 I believe in God, even when he is silent.

The words were found in a place where Jewish people hid during the Holocaust. It’s hard to imagine a more fearful time or more fearful circumstances.

In times of fear it’s a natural reaction to cry out, ‘Where are you, God? Where are you in all this mess?’ Yet sometimes as Christians we are made to feel as if our faith is failing if we question God’s silence.

At times like these we can take our fears to Jesus and know he understands. Jesus knew God’s silence. Never did anyone seem more alone than Jesus on the cross. Yet if we look to Psalm 22:1 we see his ‘forsaken’ cry echoes the words of David. In his time of greatest distress, Jesus uses words of scripture as a prayer and turns his cry of distress to one of faith. Jesus is not alone – God is with him in his word.

When anxious and under great stress, often we can struggle to find the words to express our feelings adequately. For thousands of years, men and women in similar situations have held on to words of scripture for support in times of need. There is something grounding and calming in that knowledge. God’s word roots us in his love and reminds us we are not alone.

Lord, your word provides comfort in times of distress. Help me to recognise, even in my darkest hours, I am not alone.

Strength to carry on

‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.’ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Idly gazing out of the window, I saw a cat pounce on an unsuspecting sparrow. I knocked on the glass but the cat ignored me, pushing the bird from one paw to the other, like a small ball. I rushed to the door shouting, ‘Leave it alone!’ and the cat fled, leaving the sparrow on the ground. Now it was free, I thought the bird would fly away, but it didn’t move.

Getting closer, I couldn’t see any injuries but noticed the sparrow trembling, as if in shock. I don’t know why its fear surprised me, but it did. I’d expected with the danger gone it would be on its way. Instead, the sparrow stayed rooted to the spot for at least ten minutes, until other birds came close by and it found the courage to spread its wings again.

Waiting for the sparrow to fly felt like an age. It got me thinking. How long have I allowed a fearful experience to keep me from living fully – minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years perhaps?

When under threat of any kind, real or imagined, it is natural to experience fear as an unconscious, physical response. As uncomfortable as it is, no living being can escape this sensation.

If there is a scale of fear, in this scripture we see Jesus, sweating blood, at the limits of it. His faith is not shown by his lack of fear, but in his prayer of trust, through which he gains the strength to carry on in the face of that fear.

Lord, your cross led to resurrection. Guide me through my fear, trusting you have a higher purpose for my life.

MATTHEW 8:24–25

A constant calm

Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!'

A lifeboat volunteer once told me that going to sea in a gale feels like being in a washing machine on spin. No wonder the disciples are terrified. They follow Jesus on to the boat, probably imagining they are in for a relaxing sail, only to find the demands of discipleship are rarely smooth.

Without warning the weather changes, and the disciples find themselves at the centre of a fierce storm, with waves so high they cover the boat. Meanwhile, despite the commotion, Jesus sleeps. How can anyone sleep through that? Does he not realise what's happening to his friends? Does he not realise or care that they are about to drown?

'Wake up and save us!' Have you ever felt like Jesus was sleeping in your life? Have you ever felt like you are drowning under the weight of life's problems? Do you sometimes wait until you are panic-stricken before you ask for God's help?

Jesus asks, 'Why are you so afraid?' (Matthew 8:26). Then he stands up, rebukes the wind and the waves and all is calm.

Why were the disciples so afraid? Why are we so afraid? Do we imagine God works in emergencies, but falls asleep at all other times?

While we struggle through in our own strength, Jesus is a constant, waiting for us to call on him. He is the still eye of the storm, calm even when all around turns to chaos. We can always turn to Jesus for guidance, so why do we often leave it until we feel like we're drowning before reaching out for his support?

Lord, you are a calm presence in life's storms. In these rough seas, I reach out for your peace.

Choose to love

‘You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.’

I grew up in the 1980s under the pervasive threat of nuclear war. As I write this, headlines tell me that North Korea’s nuclear threat is real and terrifying. There’s also news of toxic eggs, contaminated with the insecticide fipronil. When I was a teenager, eggs were at the centre of another safety crisis – the salmonella scare. Today news comes with a daily dose of *déjà vu*, and I begin to understand why Jesus says, ‘see to it that you are not alarmed’. The dangers may change, but there are always dangers. I can’t always control my exposure to these risks, but if I don’t control my reaction to them I could live my whole life in fear.

Behind each news story are real people whose lives have changed beyond all recognition. I wouldn’t like to see a day when I am unmoved by their suffering. The question is, moved to what?

In my home city, a 22-year-old man detonated a bomb after a pop concert at Manchester Arena, killing 23 people, including himself. Suddenly, the so-called war on terror felt very close. One of those killed was Olivia Campbell, 15. Following her death, Olivia’s family issued a statement urging people, ‘Please don’t hate in Olivia’s name; we choose to love.’

It’s hard to be open to love when your heart is protecting itself in a fortress of anxiety. Not being alarmed is not the same as hiding from reality. It’s creating space for compassion by focusing your energy on practical support, and holding the people affected, including those who cause pain, in your prayers. It’s recognising danger in the world and still choosing to love and live with hope.

Lord, I trust you have put me in this time and place for a reason. Fill me with your peace, and give me the strength to always choose love and live with hope.

JOSHUA 1:9

Beside me, always

‘Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’

Courage, like forgiveness, is easy to talk about in the abstract but when we witness it lived out its impact can be life-changing. That’s why people like the late Nelson Mandela are so admired throughout the world. In standing against apartheid and later leading reconciliation efforts in South Africa, Mandela wasn’t simply talking the Christian message; he was living it.

We expect our leaders to be courageous, but this raises problems if we begin to think courage and forgiveness are the traits of special people. The corollary of that is we can believe there are things other people can do because they are not like us and don’t feel fear.

It’s natural to feel some level of anxiety when doing something for the first time. There’s bound to be an element of stress when stepping into uncharted territory, unsure of what to expect and unable to prepare for what is coming next. Courage doesn’t come from being fearless; it comes when we carry on despite our fears.

In the scriptures, God encourages all his people – weak and strong. Joshua is Moses’ successor and a heroic figure, who leads the Israelites to the promised land and rest from war. Yet he too needed God’s support and encouragement to face his fears, to be reminded that God was always by his side.

We all have unrestricted access to God. We should gain confidence and courage from knowing that he loves us and is encouraging us every step of the way.

Lord, sometimes I hold back from life because I am afraid. Help me feel the courage of your Spirit, knowing that whatever situation I may face, I am never alone, because you are beside me, always.

God knows your heart

‘The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.’

When my nephew was two years old, I took him to see *Aladdin* on stage. It was the first time he’d been to a theatre and his eyes widened as he took in the experience. There were bright colours, flashing lights, music and lots of people laughing, shouting and cheering. There was also a pantomime villain, Abanazer.

As we get older, booing and hissing at the baddie becomes part of the fun. It’s easy to forget that for a young child immersed in the story, the threat of this villain can be real and terrifying. During the scenes with Abanazer, my nephew clung to me for safety. Then, as his fear subsided, his grip loosened. Watching the other children he summoned the courage to shout towards the stage at the top of his lungs, ‘It’s behind you!’ There were more scary moments when he snuggled in for safety, but there were other joyous times when he danced and sang freely. It was a thrilling adventure for a little one, and when Aladdin finally thwarted Abanazer’s evil plans my nephew celebrated wholeheartedly, throwing his arms in the air cheering, ‘Yeah! We did it!’

As children, when we were scared, a hug from a parent or loved one was often all we needed to give us the courage to face the world again. As adults, we don’t stop being scared, but often mask our fears with addictions – drink, drugs, medication, food, work, sex.

You don’t need to put on a brave face with God. He knows your heart and he knows when you’re scared. You don’t need to explain yourself or pretend it’s okay. Take refuge in his everlasting arms, feel his love and gain the strength to face your baddies, until you too can shout unreservedly, ‘Yeah, Lord, we did it!’

Lord, even when I hide my fear from others you know what is troubling me and understand. Hold me close to you and strengthen me with your love.



A book of 24 undated reflections drawing on a range of relevant Bible passages to offer hope and encouragement in anxious times. Encompassing the very human emotions of fear and anxiety, the reflections encourage us to draw comfort and strength from God's word even in those times when he seems silent to us. This book acknowledges that trust in God's goodness doesn't always come easily, but when embraced we gain the strength to face our fear with courage and confidence.

Carmel Thomason is an author, journalist and speaker based in Manchester, England. She has also written *Believe in Miracles*; *Against the Odds* and *Every Moment Counts*, and has collaborated with the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu on the *Faith, Hope and Love Stories* series.



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