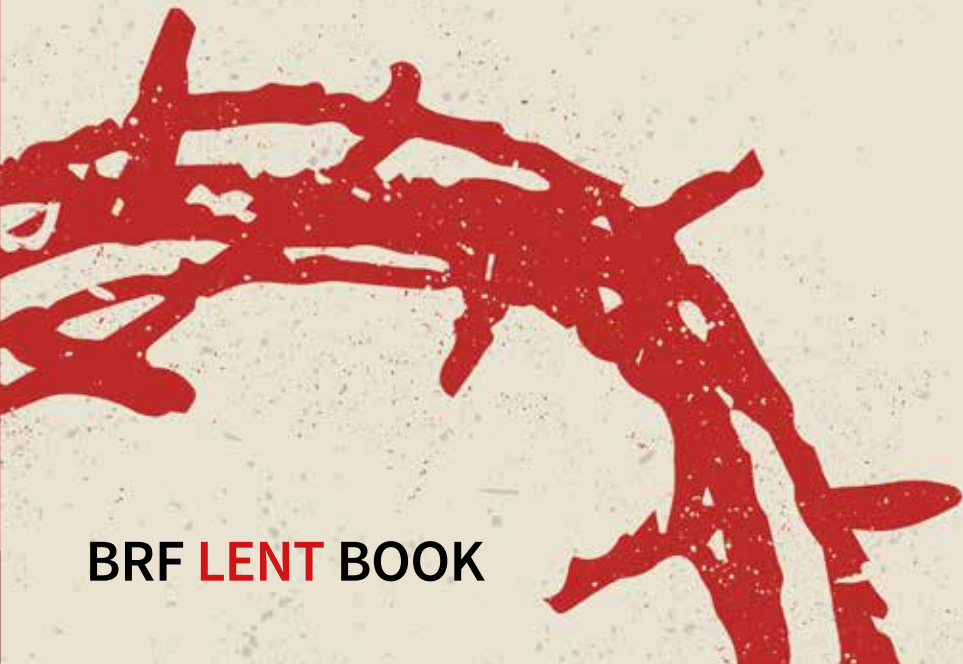


**TRYSTAN OWAIN HUGHES**

# **OPENING OUR LIVES**

*Devotional readings for Lent*



**BRF LENT BOOK**

**The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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# Introduction

## Beginning the journey

### The kingdom invitation

One spring morning a number of years back, I went for a coffee with a friend of mine, the Muslim chaplain to our local university. As we sat down in a cafe that serves the tastiest cakes, he said to me, 'Oh, no! I've just remembered: it's Lent for you, isn't it? So you must be fasting and can't eat anything.' I explained to him that, for Christians, fasting during Lent differed from fasting for Muslims during Ramadan. Many Christians, I continued, simply give up something specific, like chocolate, cakes or sweets. 'Ah, I understand now,' he said, as he chose a big slice of cake. 'So what did you give up?' 'Oh, no,' I quickly replied. 'What I meant was that *other* Christians give up something during Lent. I haven't given anything up and so can eat as much cake as I want.'

While we laughed together over our cakes, this conversation stayed with me. More than simply inspiring me to begin to give up something each Lent (which it did), it also led me to start thinking about how Christians in the 21st century could be challenged in a different way through the discipline of the Lenten period. In our hectic schedules, with all the demands and duties that we face today, perhaps the 40 days of Lent can offer a first step towards a fresh way of approaching our faith.

The practice of giving up something over Lent is, of course, an ancient tradition. Soon after the gospels were written, there is evidence that Christians would go without food or drink for 40 hours, between Good Friday afternoon and Easter morning. By the fifth century, and possibly earlier, fasting had been extended to the whole Lenten season. Today, many of us still feast on pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, even if we are



not then giving up sugary and rich food for Lent, as was the traditional practice. Self-discipline and self-control are important in the Christian life, so giving up anything, even something as innocuous as chocolate, can be a spiritual practice and can thus bring us closer to God.

In recent years, though, Christians have begun to be more creative about Lenten disciplines. Rather than *giving up*, some have embraced *giving to* a charity each day (or week) over Lent. Others have championed *taking up* over giving up, by committing to carrying out acts of compassion or kindness each day. Churches and denominations are now using Lent to inspire and support important causes through giving up, giving to and taking up. Recently, for example, the Church of England has encouraged awareness of climate change through Lenten discipline. In 2018, it distributed a calendar with environmentally themed Bible verses and suggestions on avoiding single-use plastics. A year later, it encouraged worshippers to go on 'litter pilgrimages', in which they were to walk together, pray together and collect rubbish strewn on our streets. Similarly, the charity Stewardship's popular 40acts challenge urges Christians to view Lent as a time of radical generosity as well as spiritual discipline, with individuals and groups signing up to emails which detail daily challenges through the 40 days, including compassionate actions, environmental steps and charitable giving, and then being encouraged to share their efforts on social media.

Whether you intend to give up, give to or take up, this book adds another dimension – encouraging you also to *open up* this Lent. Each week you will be invited to open up to different ways of experiencing the kingdom of God, being challenged to think and reflect on biblical passages and, by so doing, open each part of your life to God's Spirit.

Many churches worldwide celebrate Jesus' kingship prior to Advent, with a Sunday dedicated to Christ the King. This festival has been placed, very deliberately, at the end of the liturgical year, to root the kingship of Jesus in the future, as we await his coming kingdom. This Lent, though, we are going to be encouraged to recognise that

Christ's kingdom is in the *now* as well as being *not yet*. Jesus, after all, is already our king, and although we will witness his kingdom in its fullness in the future, it is already here. Our invitation is now to open ourselves to recognising that kingdom's beauty, wonder, comfort and love all around us. Once you have opened yourself up in this way for the Lenten period, the challenge will then be to continue seeing, hearing and living out God's kingdom beyond Easter.

## Our Lenten prayer

Before you read each daily reflection, calm your heart and mind by slowly reading, or saying out loud, the following prayer:

*Loving God,  
in our sufferings and joys,  
in our relationships and daily lives,  
we ask that your kingdom come.  
Open our eyes to your presence,  
open our ears to your call,  
open our hearts to your love,  
open our ways to your will,  
open our actions to your compassion,  
open our pain to your peace,  
and, in doing so, open our world to your hope.  
In the name of Jesus,  
Amen*

≡ WEEK 1 ≡

**Open our eyes  
to your presence**

## Sunday

# Good news

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;  
I will sing the praises of your name.'

Again, it says,

'Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.'

And again,

'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;  
let all the peoples extol him.'

And again, Isaiah says,

'The Root of Jesse will spring up,  
one who will arise to rule over the nations;  
in him the Gentiles will hope.'

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

ROMANS 15:7-13

When I was younger, I loved comedy sketch shows, like *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Two Ronnies*, *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and *The Fast Show*. I still remember many of the catchphrases and punchlines, and I annoy my children by repeating them endlessly. One recurring sketch was of a French philosopher musing on the meaning of life. In the tradition of 20th-century French philosophy, he had a rather depressing outlook. In one episode, he sat, staring at half a glass of milk. Then, looking into the camera and in a gloomy French accent, he asserted, 'Some people look at half a glass of milk and say that it is half empty; other people look at half a glass of milk and say that it is half full. I look at half a glass of milk and say that it is sour.' In today's passage we are led to ask how we view our faith. Are we glass-half-full or glass-half-empty Christians? Are we the people of hope and optimism or of fear and cynicism?

The film critic Mark Kermode points out that the most memorable film reviews are not those that are glowing and positive, but the ones that are acerbic, biting and critical. He lists dozens of these reviews – from the review of *The Flintstones* that simply said, 'Yabba-dabba-don't', to the review of *Vampires Suck* that stated, 'Vampires Suck, but this film sucks more!' Nothing sells better than bad news, he concludes, as he inverts a popular saying: 'Good news is no news.'

Increasingly, 'good news is no news' is also true of society at large. We have an inclination towards cynicism, distrust and scepticism, and we often revel in bad news. Our news channels are not full of uplifting events that happen daily in our communities but rather of disasters and crime. Our tendency towards revelling in pessimism and negativity seems to have developed hand-in-hand with a loss of hope in our society, exacerbated in recent years by political upheaval and a ruthless pandemic. Hopelessness, despair and malaise are some of the most damaging elements that we face today – in our society, politics and faith.

Yet Jesus inspires us to open our eyes to the good news and hope that still exist all around. Many of the hymns that we sing in churches

come from a time when life was so much more taxing than our lives today. Still, these hymns continue to hold on to a message of joy and expectation. The slaves who wrote and sang the African-American spirituals, despite the terrible hardships they faced, never lost that sense of hope in their songs. Similarly, many of the celebrated reformers of the past century have been rooted in Christian hope, and their struggle never led them to cynicism or hopelessness. The great civil rights campaigners, for example, were inspired by dreams of future equality, rather than being shackled by nightmares of their present situation. 'Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness,' wrote Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

In our church nativity one year, my eldest son was given the job of holding placards with the words 'good news' and 'bad news' on them. The congregation were encouraged to shout 'Pass it on, pass it on' when he showed the 'good news' placard and 'Oh dear, oh dear' when he showed the other placard. Unfortunately, he got a bit confused and ended up lifting the wrong placards at the wrong times. So, the congregation ended up shouting 'Pass it on, pass it on' when bad news was given and shouting 'Oh dear, oh dear' when good news was announced!

Too often we fall into that very trap, as we pass on any bad news that we hear and become cynical at the good news. We need to step off that treadmill of pessimism and show that we are people of new life, hope and resurrection. Even our word 'gospel', which comes from the Old English words *god*, meaning 'good', and *spel*, meaning 'news', makes it clear that we are a faith of good news, inspiration and transformation. We don't need to see things as half empty or half full. Rather, we are called simply to open our eyes to the promise and hope all around us.

## Reflection

*The most potent threats to both our society and our churches are hopelessness and cynicism. Once they catch hold, they spread like infections and isolate us from light and life, as we concentrate on weaknesses we perceive in ourselves, in our churches or in the wider society. Today, open your eyes to the good news all around you, whether on the TV news, in newspapers or in the lives of family or friends. Commit yourself to being a person of hope.*



*Enabling all ages to grow in faith*



Anna Chaplaincy  
Living Faith  
Messy Church  
Parenting for Faith

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the opening up of our lives to God's transformative kingdom.**

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