

# Making sense of it...

New Year 2020 (29 December -1 February)



The New Year is often a time of reassessment. After the feasting of Christmas and Hogmanay we can find ourselves wanting to get fitter and healthier. The temptation of a crisp new calendar seems to promise a fresh start in other ways: a chance to reboot, restart, relaunch a 'new' you. These attempts are often comically doomed to failure. We write long colour coded lists and set unrealistic expectations and are surprised when we crash and burn, when our resolutions become... less resolved... But sometimes the new initiatives stick, January 1st may be an arbitrary time to start something but it's better than 'maybe tomorrow' or 'probably next week' and far better than 'some day' or 'one day'.

At this time of year, when many of us are wanting to work on our fitness and our habits, perhaps starting new routines, we thought it would be stimulating to read our Bible mindful of our bodies and our senses. As we re-tune physically we can re-tune spiritually, open to new ways ancient texts might speak to us. There are many, many valid ways of reading scripture — that's why it is such a dense, rich collection — but often we come to it in pretty similar ways, noticing the same kind of things. This month we invite you to start your year by reading the Bible awake to your senses. As you read think: what could these people see, taste, smell? Think about how what you read affects how you feel, and what you sense. We also want to think about more than the big five senses — we have many more than five — our bodies pick up on time, temperature, balance, music!

*Each week of the theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and thought triggers.*

## Getting in touch (29 December)

In our first week we will read the Bible alert to our sense of touch. We live in a big multi-textured world and touch affects us in many ways: feeling solid ground can be reassuring after a long voyage, as can the embrace of a loved one after emotional turmoil. Touch can be many things — exciting, scary, dreadful, painful, confusing, healing. Our nerve endings are highly sensitive and constantly giving us information...

### 1. Isaiah 63:7-9

1. **Being carried by the Lord...** What does it feel like when someone lifts you up and carries you? Considering the tactile care and sensitivity of the Lord.

### 2. Psalm 148

2. **The immense diversity of creation.** Read this psalm of praise attentive to all the different substances, materials and textures of creation. Sharp, smooth, feathered, furry, icy, burning, gritty, wrinkled, gnarled, rocky...

### 3. Hebrews 2:10-18

3. **The importance of experience** — “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” What physical sensations did Jesus feel in his human form?

### 5. Acts 9: 10-18

4. **A rollercoaster of feelings.** A lot goes on in these ten verses: vivid dreams, disrupted sleep, midnight moves, crossing borders. Joseph is given as the main protagonist here. Put yourself in his shoes and imagine all the things he would have felt physically as a father looking after his new family on the open road, in a foreign land, under the cover of darkness, in the midst of turmoil...

### 6. Job 1:1, 2:1-10

5. **Touch as transformation.** When we think about senses and the conversion of Saul we tend to think of his temporary blindness and the restoration of his sight. But the key hinge moment in the story is one of touch when Ananias places his hands on Brother Saul.

### 7. Luke 4:40

6. **Being uncomfortable in your skin...** Encountering pain, discomfort, and irritation. The detail of Job using the piece of broken pottery to scratch himself is striking and help us to ‘feel’ it.

7. **Each one.** Jesus has a personal moment with each one. What would that have felt like?

## Setting your sights (5 January)

In this second week we think particularly about our sense of sight — we will consider our vision, God's perspective, the mystery of light itself, and what we notice when we follow the star...

1. **Jeremiah 31:7-14**
  2. **Isaiah 60:1-6**
  3. **Psalm 147:12-20**
  4. **Ephesians 1:3-14**
  5. **John 1:1-13**
  6. **Psalm 72:10-14**
  7. **Matthew 2:1-12**
1. **A compelling vision.** We are being invited to picture the scene with the aid of specific visual details. Considering the power of a rich vision.
  2. **Shining like the sun!** Seeing and being seen. Reflecting the glory of the Lord. Is this simply a metaphor or are people drawn by something they can actually see?
  3. **Gates, ashes, wool, snow...** The poetry in these verses is full of arresting descriptions. It could be easy to skim past them and rush to 'the point', but let's take time to look at the imagery in verses 13-18.
  4. **Marked with a seal.** What does it mean in real everyday terms to be "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit" (NRSV)? Is it something that you can in any way 'see'? Is it noticeable? Detectable to others?
  5. **The light of all people...** Thinking about the science of light and perception. We see light — but it's also through light that we see everything else.
  6. **Is blood precious in our sight?** Do we live in such a way that we value the gift of life? Or would we rather look the other way?
  7. **Following the star...** The point of following the bright shining star is to see what's underneath it... Where are we looking this New Year? What are we missing? What are we finding?

## I've heard it said (12 January)

Listen up! This week we are exploring hearing: processing, analysing, considering and then acting in response to sound. Listening takes attention and that attention is easier to give if we feel invested, like we belong, like what we are listening to has worth and is meant for us. Community is a key part of how we learn to listen to the Bible, to God and to each other. What are these passages saying? Are we listening? Try reading the passages aloud; maybe ask someone else to read them to you.

### 1. Isaiah 42:1-9

1. **'He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.'** Wise, just, resolutely bringing freedom but not aggro, yelling and grandstanding...

### 2. Psalm 29

2. **Listening to the thundering voice of the Lord...** With the Trinity we get dynamic range! From the years of Jesus's quiet service to the mighty voice here.

### 3. Acts 10:34-43

3. **Testimony and witness.** The message spread and is continuing to spread. What did it sound like as it spread? When it crossed borders, cultures and languages? What does it sound like now?

### 4. Matthew 3:13-17

4. **A voice from heaven...** What did the voice sound like?

### 5. James 1:19-27

5. **Turning sound into action.** When runners race they use a starter's pistol rather than a flag or a flashing light at the starting line. Even though sound travels more slowly than light, our bodies respond more quickly and start moving faster to a noise stimulus. With sound there's less processing for our brains to do. Sometimes something you hear goes in deeper than something you see — perhaps it goes in more directly with less filtering than sight. Considering what happens when we listen to the words of God and others, and then act...

### 6. Proverbs 1:8-9

6. **But what if...** What if the words of your parents are/were not garlands and pendants, but unwise words that still haunt you? How do we sift through all the messages we hear, storing the good and letting go of the bad?

### 7. John 10: 22-30

7. **Recognising the voice of God.** Put yourself in the scene. You are there listening to Jesus speak. What else can you hear? What are the sounds going on around you? How do you recognise his voice? Re-tune into Jesus — what does he sound like? What do you pick up of his tone, mood, personality?

## Taste and see (19 January)

Taste and smell are closely related and make for interesting metaphors that capture what we can struggle to in more overused analogies like sight and hearing... Smells and tastes are strongly linked to our emotion and memory, a bite or sniff can bring it all back: delight or disgust, fear or fascination... As you read the texts consider what tastes or smells, if any, they evoke? What memories does it bring to mind? Also consider what the food then would taste/smell like?

### 1. Psalm 40:1-11

1. **Miry bogs and burnt offerings.** These evocative words bring to mind strong smells — what feelings do these (and other parts of the text) make you think of?

### 2. John 1:29-42

2. **A smelly world.** This passage doesn't immediately make you think of any smells. But the world being described was likely a pungent one. John the Baptist was probably a bit of a funky character what with his wilderness ways. The disciples as well were likely to smell of fishing and graft and labour. Take time to imagine the earthy world these people lived in. We hear the words of the Bible, sometimes we picture it, but rarely do we take time to imagine what their world smelled like — what it was like to *be there*.

### 3. Ephesians 5: 1-2

### 4. Daniel 3

### 5. Exodus 16: 31-36

3. **A fragrant offering.** What does it mean to be a 'fragrant' offering? What's your idea of fragrant?

### 6. John 2: 1-12

4. **"...there was no smell of fire on them."** As we are tuning into sensory observations this month let's focus on this odd detail — there was no smell of fire on them (verse 27). Not only are they not burnt to a crisp, they don't even smell smoky!

### 7. Psalm 34: 8

5. **What is our 'omer of manna' for generations to come?** What are the tastes we are preserving for future generations. (Also: what do you make of manna itself — how would you cook with it?)

6. **Saving the best taste till last?** A counter-cultural act of generosity.

7. **Taste and see.** A meal can look delicious but the truth, as they say, is in the pudding! Taste cut straight to the heart of us — bringing us back to childhood, to our emotions, to our biggest hopes and worries.

## Having a sense of... (26 January)

There's the big five senses: touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight — but we also have a number of other senses. What can we learn about God by tuning into these senses?

1. Isaiah 9: 1-4

2. Psalm 27: 1-9

3. 1 Corinthians 1:  
10-18

4. Matthew 4: 17-23

5. Romans 8: 18-27

6. 2 Peter 3: 8

7. 1 Corinthians 12:  
12-27

1. **Having a sense of humour.** The light at the end of the darkness and the release of tension that comes from a sense of overwhelming relief can lead to laughter and whoops of delight. Do we tend to associate our faith with laughter and rejoicing and glee?
2. **Having a sense of tune.** Celebrating the wonder of music — the ability to sense and produce intricate patterns of sounds. Music gives us powerful ways of expressing ourselves and communicating with the divine.
3. **Having a sense of balance.** It is easy to get carried away and to pull too much in one direction. We get caught up by a particular leader or personality and are thrown off and capsized. How can we fine-tune our sense of balance? (Consider folk like tight rope walkers, dancers, mountain climbers and skiers, how do they cope?)
4. **Having a sense of direction.** The disciples get a new direction — both metaphorical and literal. How do you pick up on the new direction God is taking you in? (Metaphorical and literal!)
5. **Having a sense of pain.** The poetry and pain of birthing and becoming. Creativity and creation — life itself seem linked with pain but not an indefinite pain, not a pain that goes unnoticed, uncried for. The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.
6. **Having a sense of time.** We experience time in what seems like a straightforward linear way but science tell us that our sense of time is more subjective that we realise. In some senses 'time' as we live it is a construct! If that's not mad enough... God is outside of time...
7. **Having a sense of where and what we are...** *Kinaesthesia* — is the way we sense where our bodies are in space. With my eyes closed and my ears blocked (and without anything touching my foot) I still know where my foot is in relation to my body. How can we get better at applying this awareness of how we fit together to the body of Christ? Knowing where one another are and working together.