If you are looking for a reliable, short introduction to the life of Francis of Assisi, then this may be the book for you. Professor Cunningham is a teacher of theology, but writes with a lightness of touch that belies the considerable scholarship behind these 150 pages. He often makes passing remarks about other writings on Saint Francis, not without a caustic wit on occasion, as he tries to show the Francis beyond romantic imagination. This is the Francis who cried 'Peace!' in an age of urban violence, the apostle of crucified love rather than just a dreamer talking to animals. In particular, Cunningham draws attention to the writings of Francis, showing him to be an obedient son of the institutional church, in opposition to the more anti-clerical/sacramental groups that were his contemporaries. He brings out the devotion of Francis to the Eucharist (though without mentioning his devotion to Mary), and explores the influence of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, during which Francis was in Rome.

Cunningham sees the originality of Francis in his understanding of evangelical poverty: not just a giving up of material possessions, but a surrendering of all things by actually 'performing' the Gospel life. Although his poverty no doubt had an element of protest about it, it was much more an act of devotion to the Christ who became poor for our sakes; and this poverty led naturally to the joy that was a characteristic of Francis' spirituality. This joy in turn brought a continuing concern for peace, for reconciliation whether with one's neighbour in one's home town or with the 'enemy' in foreign lands.

The book concludes with a helpful 'Reading Essay', a guide to the most important works on Francis in English, and an appendix explaining where the prayer 'Make me a channel of your peace' (often called 'The Prayer of Saint Francis') really came from.