

Introduction

Twenty (or so) years on it is very difficult to call to mind the title of many of the undergraduate essays that I was set as a student. One, however, sticks in my mind and has accompanied me through many years of thinking, reflecting and praying: ‘Why did Jesus die?’ I must admit that the initial reason this question sticks in my mind is because it evokes (at least in me) a flippant response: ‘Why did Jesus die?’ Because not many people survived crucifixion.

Beyond flippancy, however, the question takes us right to the heart of our Christian faith and especially to the heart of our devotions during Holy Week. There are numerous serious answers that you can give to the question ‘Why did Jesus die?’ and during Holy Week we are driven back time and time again to asking that question in many different ways.

Christian tradition has provided many different answers to this one question. Some answers are more theological: he died that we might be forgiven; he died to redeem us from the power of sin; he died to reconcile us to God, and so on. The doctrine of the atonement significantly deals with the wide variety of theological answers given to the question of why Jesus died.

Other answers focus more on historical reasons for Jesus’ death. Jesus died because his ministry put him in such conflict with either the Roman authorities or the Jewish leaders (or both) that his death became an inevitable outcome of this conflict. To this, some might add that the particular events of the last week of Jesus’ life, including the fact that Jerusalem was packed with people coming for the feast of the Passover, meant that it was timing that led ultimately to his death. In other words if Jesus had

come to Jerusalem having said and done exactly the same things a week later, he might not have died. It was surely the anxiety of the Romans about the crowds during Passover, combined with the concern of the Jewish leaders to avoid any unnecessary upheavals, that contributed to the inevitability of Jesus' death.

Circling around the many and varied answers to the question of why Jesus died is the deeply uncomfortable question of whether Jesus effectively committed suicide. Did he, knowing that his death would bring salvation, so manipulate timings and events that the only possible outcome was his own death?

Put crudely the question is, who or what was responsible for Jesus' death? God? The Romans? The Jews? Our sin? Jesus himself? The problem, of course, with crude questions is that they prompt crude answers, and crude answers rarely have much overlap with the truth. You only need to look at the horrific outcomes of anti-Semitism throughout Christian history to recognize that asking whether Jesus' death was the fault of the Jews (and then giving an affirmative answer) was a direct route towards some of the most evil actions of the previous century.

So crude questions and equally crude answers are to be avoided, but thoughtful, reflective questions and answers are not. The point seems to be that there is no one question, nor any one answer, that quite suffices. A range of factors – political, historical and theological – came together in the final week of Jesus' life in such a way as there could only be one outcome and we have been attempting ever since to mine the causes and consequences of this in order to discern the meaning(s) of the event.

In my view it is precisely the multiplicity of questions that need to be asked and the multiplicity of answers that can be given that brings us into the realm of truth: truth that points the finger of blame at no one person or group and that continues to open up perspectives rather than close them down.

The more I read the Gospels, the more convinced I am that the Gospel writers were also circling the same questions. The problem is that the way in which the Gospels are treated in liturgy and preaching means that their accounts are often harmonized so that their differences are smoothed out and harder to perceive. The

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result of this is that we often lose sight of the fact that each Gospel writer in his own way was asking the question why Jesus died and looking not only at what caused his death but what effect his death had on the world.

As a result, in this book we will be looking at the Gospel accounts as separately as possible. In particular we will be noting places where a Gospel writer has material not found elsewhere or has the same material in a different form and asking why this might be. We will look primarily at Matthew, Mark and Luke, because their accounts are closest together and easiest to read alongside each other, but from time to time where John's account is particularly important we will explore that too.

As in a number of my other books I would like to make clear that I am not a historical Jesus scholar and this book does not seek to prove (or disprove) the historicity of any of the events described in the Gospels. This is not my expertise and I shall leave it to others more qualified in this area than I to ruminate on the historicity of the events in question. My interest is in what the text says (rather than what we assume it says) and in why it might be saying it in a particular way. I aim for a close reading of the text in the original language (which I will explain when necessary) and to reflect on its meaning and significance.

My interest lies in what the Gospels tell us about who Jesus was. It lies in seeking to be inspired again by Jesus Christ, Son of God, who brought such transformative good news to the world. It lies in seeking to accompany him with heart, soul, mind and strength to his death and beyond. It lies in an encounter with the dying and rising Christ through the pages of Gospels and in trying to imagine what kind of life we might be able to live now as a consequence of all that Jesus was and did.

The journey to the empty tomb is of course Jesus' own journey but, if we accompany him with hearts on fire, minds alert and spirits open, then sometimes we will discover that it has also become our own journey, and that we too have been transformed by the God who raised Jesus from the dead.