

Prologue

The seed for this book was sown and then nurtured in two of the most iconic cities in Christian history. In January 2012 I was privileged to be invited to accompany the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was a profoundly moving experience, and all those of us who went recount in different ways how the pilgrimage changed our lives and our relationship with God. One afternoon we sat together in Jerusalem on the roof of the hostel where we were staying and I was asked to reflect for a while on why, from the perspective of the New Testament and New Testament scholars, Jesus died.

In a subsequent conversation, the then Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, David Richardson, suggested that the ideas we had begun to explore would make a rather good course. As a result, in March of the following year, I led a course in Rome at the Anglican Centre with the same title as this book. The primary question of the course was the same as the one we had raised in Jerusalem – Why did Jesus die?

Over the space of a week with a wonderful group of participants from many different places around the world, we explored the last week of Jesus' life in the pages of the Gospels, starting with Palm Sunday and ending at the resurrection. At the end of that week it seemed to me and to a number of others that I spoke to, that these ideas had further to go, and that people other than simply those who had been able to come on the course might appreciate the chance to explore the last week of Jesus' life in more detail.

JOURNEY TO THE EMPTY TOMB

The idea for this book was born and nurtured in Jerusalem and Rome: the two key cradles of early Christianity.

The book would never have taken the form it has, however, without two significant groups of people: my fellow pilgrims to the Holy Land and my fellow course participants in Rome. I dedicate this book to you all with love and gratitude for your wisdom, your inspiration and your willingness to be true companions on the way.

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This book could be read in all sorts of ways. It aims to be ‘academically devotional’. By this I mean that I use the insights of scholarship to understand the Gospel texts better, and by doing so attempt to reinspire and reinvigorate our devotional journeys with Jesus to the cross and beyond. It is designed for anyone who wants to explore the texts of the last week of Jesus’ life in a little more detail. It is a ‘semi-commentary’ in that I am exploring the texts in order, but I attempt to do this differently by providing continuous text that is easier to read than many commentaries are, supplemented by boxes which pull out details where necessary. It is not exhaustive – a book of this length simply cannot aim to be. As a result there will be details, and even whole passages, that cannot be pursued as well as they might.

What is covered are things that I think are interesting; my apologies in advance where you disagree with me on what counts as interesting. What this small book really aims to do is whet your appetite again for reading these passages in detail and reflecting on what the Gospel writers were attempting to communicate in the way that they wrote.

At the end of each section are a few paragraphs of reflection based around thoughts and ideas that my study of the passages has evoked in me. Again these are not exhaustive and you may find that you have entirely different reflections yourself. In a similar way at the end of each chapter is a prayer/meditation, which again reflect ideas that have occurred to me as I wrote. Some will

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appreciate them, others may not; please engage with them or not as is helpful to you.

Some people will want to read the book early on in Lent to help them get new ideas for what they might say in the services of Holy Week and Easter; others will want to read it through Lent to help them prepare personally for Easter; others still may want to read the book in Holy Week itself to help them focus on the events of the last week of Jesus' life in the actual week that we commemorate them. Alternatively you may dip in and out, just looking at the sections that interest you. (If you want to use the material in this book as a Lent course I have added questions for discussion right at the end of the book and a suggestion of how the material could be used in the context of a study group.)

Given this, I have arranged the material into five chapters. I cannot stress strongly enough that the chapters do not fit the actual days of Holy Week, not least because it is impossible to decide which events described in the Gospels as taking place after the triumphal entry and before the last supper fell on which days. It is also important to note that the chapters (and the sections within the chapters) are not equal length, as it is not possible to treat this material equitably in terms of words. I apologize for this, as I like a book with even chapters, but the material simply defies equal sections. Some are far longer than others, largely as the text itself dictates.

I have hugely enjoyed the process of reflecting on these ideas, working up the material, reading the texts again and again and finally choosing what to put down on paper. I hope that you will also enjoy reading these passages and be inspired once more by the Jesus who set his face to Jerusalem and faithfully lived out his calling despite the cost.