



Difficult Paths

Introduction

We often regard the seven days which follow Palm Sunday as Holy Week. Following Jesus' entry in to Jerusalem, the original Holy Week saw Jesus led to his death on a cross and climaxed with his resurrection.

The following pages contain seven readings and reflections from the final chapters of Luke's gospel, beginning at the end of Luke 19. They are intended as daily reflections running from Monday to Easter Sunday, but of course can be used on other occasions.

They highlight the difficult path that Jesus followed in the week leading up to his death and resurrection. Undeniably, these singular events have a profound individual significance – Christ died for our sins. But the concerns of Jesus and the implication of this story also demand that we look beyond ourselves. As we journey through Holy Week we are challenged, not only about how we follow him on this path to new life, but also how we can bring the new life of Christ to bear in our communities and the world in which we live.

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Suggestions for using this resource

'Difficult Paths' is intended as a short series of Bible studies for individuals or small groups, though the material could also be used to shape reflection in the context of worship during Holy Week.

We recommend that you begin your journey by reading Luke 19 - 24 in one sitting. This will give an overview of Jesus' final days and help you to tune in to the people, circumstances and dilemmas Jesus encounters. As you read the familiar words, perhaps aloud, try to enter into the scene being described. Imagine yourself as a bystander or participant in the action and consider each decision, challenge or dialogue as one who was there. Think about the emotional journey of those involved, which we often overlook. What might the different people be feeling? How does each view themselves in relation to God, others and the wider social order? What place does each occupy in their social world? Is there a choice or a change to be made? We cannot know the whole story, but in pausing to let the words take us into that last week, we make for ourselves a holy space in which to walk with Jesus.

As you approach each study give time and stay focused on the day and particular story you are reading. Don't be impatient to move on to the next page and in so doing miss the learning that comes from listening and reflection.

Having read the text and reflected on the comment for each day, take time to ask, 'what does this mean?' – for yourself and your relationships with others; for the church and the world. James writes, 'Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.' (Jas. 1:22) Applying learning to our life and witness... this is our Difficult Path.

Studies

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Read: Luke 19:41-44

1 The things that make for peace.

The people of Jerusalem loved the place where they lived. Their community, their history and God's involvement in it gave them identity, security, perhaps even a feeling of superiority. Though currently living under Roman rule, they were certain God would soon restore their nation.

But, says Jesus, for loving their history more than the one who came to fulfil it, bringing true peace and for failing to recognise God when he came, they stood to lose this very thing that they loved. The security and identity they boasted would be torn up from the inside because they wouldn't recognise or submit to the one person offering them real security and identity.

They had cheered him on his entry to Jerusalem – here was the king to represent and vindicate them. But welcome had quickly turned to rejection in the space of a few days. The route to peace he espoused wasn't what they were expecting, or prepared to follow. Jesus, the embodiment of a self-giving God, didn't fit with their politics of self-assertion.

Now in the final week of his life on earth, Jesus wept for those he came to save, who elevated their traditions, their politics and their community over him. Yet, he follows the difficult path of sacrificial love for their sake.

Our own heritage and preferred politics can have a strong pull on our lives too, even to the point of hoping that God will vindicate us. Though we may be blind and unyielding, the servant God, who brings true peace, challenges our misplaced security.

Many have stood over the place where we live and have wept because it does not know peace. What hope for the future if apathy gets the better of us? Imagine if Jesus had cast a quick glance at Jerusalem, hopped back on his donkey and said, 'Oh well, that's life...'

Consider: What things might make for peace in your situation?



Read: Luke 20:20-26

2 A taxing question.

Hoping to catch Jesus out, the teachers of the law and the chief priests sent spies to question him. Would Jesus say, 'Pay tax!' and incur the wrath of the Zionist crowd, or 'Forget tax!' and get an immediate appointment with Pontius Pilate?

Jesus' wise answer is often used to develop a theology of citizenship or state authority. There are two things that should not escape our notice here.

Firstly, Jesus causes a storm by endorsing the payment of tax and does not condemn the Roman Empire that governs great Jerusalem. The authorities may be irreligious, immoral and ungodly, meddling with God's holy city, but he does not call for them to be ignored or overthrown. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's', says Jesus; 'Give to God what is God's.' What Caesar looks to gain is earthly and temporary – give it to him and don't long for it yourselves. What God demands is of lasting consequence – take care to give it to him.

Following God, then, profoundly influences our politics and earthly citizenship, but must not be confused with our politics and earthly citizenship. Jesus says they are related, but are to be differentiated. We are called to act justly and be responsible citizens, but without identifying divine demands with those of earthly government.

Secondly, Jesus refers to the coin showing Caesar's image and inscription when he says 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God what is God's'. So what *is* God's?

The money is Caesar's for it bears his image and words. As we read in Genesis 1:26, human beings are created in God's image and even Gentiles have the requirements of the law written on their hearts. (Rom 2:14-15). Each individual bears the imprint and the inscription of the Creator. Each one is created by God and is called to give themselves to God.

The teachers of the law seek to catch their opponent out, make him look stupid and stir up tension between the communities – a tactic we often openly encourage or tacitly support in our own political leaders. Jesus answers them brilliantly; sidestepping the trap and making clear that God cannot be boxed in by national politics. All people of every nationality bear his mark and are to be understood as his special creation.

Consider: If we are overly concerned about what others might think, we may be tempted to do nothing and so miss opportunities to do good. We are called to give ourselves fully in the service of God and this should liberate us! Are there opportunities to serve God in our community that we might be avoiding?

Read: Luke 21:1-8

3 Collapsed institutions, fearful tribes.

The temple in Jerusalem had a special place in the life of the nation spiritually and politically. The building itself was a source of pride, richly adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. Out of the blue, Jesus drops the bombshell that the temple will be destroyed. He says, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.' The destruction of the temple – surely this spells the beginning of the end?

Jesus observes that the temple has become corrupt. The widow's gift leaves her without anything to live on. Is Jesus not so much praising her 'generosity' as condemning an institution which, rather than aiding her, makes her destitute?

The people react nervously to the news, they look for short-term assurances and signs. But Jesus is looking further into the future. He speaks of wisdom and endurance, not ready answers and spiritual stopgaps. He warns them against false prophets and messiahs which will rise up to fill the void, the moral vacuum.

We too live in times of upheaval and change. This is an age characterised by scepticism towards any universal ideas or truth, dogma or ideology. Disillusionment with the previously accepted ways of understanding gives rise to quests for alternative ways of seeing. This can foster a belief that all authorities and institutions are corrupt and oppressive, that there are no certainties and no one can be believed or trusted any more. Relativism, cynicism and apathy reign.

Often, when faced with insecurity, we turn inward to find security among our own people. Sticking together offers a measure of reassurance and hope. Complex realities become simplified into black and white. 'Otherness' becomes the object of suspicion and threat. Rumours and fears oppress and conflict erupts out of rivalry.

Take comfort, says Jesus. Trust in me, the future is in God's hands. You may not understand the current times. But resist the bright figures pedalling certainties and stirring up division. Don't give in to them. Don't follow them. Don't let yourself be deceived by them.

Tribalism, apathy and cynicism must not be the Christian's reaction to an uncertain, grey world. These are false gods with hollow futures. We must endure, wait on the Lord and his wisdom and not fall into imitating the world around us.

Pray: May we resist being drawn into our fearful tribes and have the courage to be disciples who stand for Christ and against injustice, hatred and deception.



Read: Luke 22:24-27

4 So you think you're great, do you?

It must have been a hard week for Jesus.

The Son of God, he'd set aside power, authority, majesty and honour to come and tread the difficult path of service on earth. And all for a people who, on the whole, seemed hell-bent on rejecting him. He must have known that the cheering crowds greeting him as he entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week would fade to a memory, replaced by a palpable sense of mounting rejection. There had already been several confrontations.

Pressure on Jesus mounts. Still to come, an evening so unbearable he sweats blood, then betrayal, mockery and torture before he finally succumbs to the ultimate humiliation of crucifixion. But, as their king walks the lonely path of obedience even unto death, in the middle of this most bitterly awful week, all the disciples can do is squabble about who is the greatest.

Who can boast power and honour? Who carries the greatest weight and authority? Who would be the most exalted? Would it be the most gifted, the one who had been around longest, the strongest, the most popular, the best persuader? Who could claim to be the greatest?

The motives of the disciples, or of the Gentiles (v25), matter little. Perhaps they did want the power to change things for the better, to make things good. But Jesus' words are heavy with irony, suggesting that any good intentions have been lost in the scramble for power and authority. Just like the kings of the Gentiles who lord it over others – they may be called 'doers of good' (benefactors), but power and authority have become their main focus.

The disciples are to follow Jesus' example. He sits among them at the table, as their friend, but also as one who serves. At this table those partaking must lay aside any claim to greatness or superiority. From now on we are to be servants rather than mere consumers or seekers of self-satisfaction. That is the way of the kingdom. Jesus walked it – how might we follow his example?

Read: Luke 23:13-25

5 Walking the last mile in another's shoes.

At the heart of Christian faith and theology is the “great swap” which took place on Good Friday when Christ took the place of sinners. The righteous for the unrighteous, Peter calls it, to bring us back to God.

In Luke 23, this very role reversal is played out on the streets of Jerusalem for all to see, shortly before we see Jesus take that place on the cross.

Barabbas, guilty of insurrection in the city and a murderer, a real first-century terrorist, is basically on death row, destined to end up on a cross. No sympathy, no repentance, no hope.

And Jesus – held on false charges, tried and found ‘not guilty’, not only by the Roman Governor, but also by Herod – now back before Pilate who wants him flogged and released.

But the crowd, inexplicably, wants Barabbas set free and Jesus crucified – the guilty to walk free, the innocent to die in his place. Pilate is in a no-win situation and gives in to the crowd's demand. But this is part of God's plan, as Luke reports Peter saying much later on (Acts 2:23).

The phenomenal truth of the best deal ever made on Good Friday is that Jesus went to the cross in the place of the guilty and gave the chance of freedom and life, even to an unrepentant terrorist. Forgiveness and hope are offered even before it is realised they are needed. ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8). I wonder what Barabbas did with the rest of his life?

The grace of God extends to absolutely everyone, irrespective of what they have done, where they have come from, what they “deserve” or what we think about them.

But it seems unnatural to us – God's grace runs contrary to our deepest instincts. It is hard to come to terms with – both for those who have been forgiven much and for those whose suffering cannot be undone. Forgiveness cannot change the past, but only forgiveness can open the way to a new future.

Pray: That we might learn to forgive, as we too have been forgiven.



Read: Luke 23:48-49

6 Shattered.

The Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday is a strange day. On Good Friday, we concentrate on the significance of Jesus' death and on Easter Sunday, we think about the power of his new life. But what about in between?

Following Jesus' death, the people who had gathered to see the spectacle of public execution went home beating their breasts. It had been gruesome, disturbing, emotional, even shocking as they witnessed it – but life must go on. The events of that weekend would soon dim in the memory and be left behind, to have little ongoing effect on their lives – moving while it lasted, but yesterday's news now.

But, Luke relates, all those who knew Jesus stood at a distance and watched these things. Imagine them taking in the scene – the crosses, the people dispersing, soldiers keeping a watchful eye – the events of the last days still replaying through their heads in a blur. What exactly had they just witnessed? Maybe some stood back and reflected, trying to find some significance in it all. Was there any meaning to be found? Where to now? What next? How could they go on? It must have seemed like the end of the world, or perhaps just the end of the world as they knew it.

Perhaps Easter Saturday provides us with the space to do the same. To reflect on the events of Jesus' last week; on the Jesus we know and are still getting to know; on the profound significance of his life, teaching and death; on the challenges for our relationship with God, each other and the world; on a potential new future of change and hope.

And such reflection is not limited to Easter Saturday. There may be a need for many "Easter Saturdays" in our lives, and in the lives of those we love, every time events seem to shatter our world.

Let us take time to take in the scene together.

Read: Luke 24:25-32

7 Put your heart into it!

It is the third day, Christ is risen! The body is missing from the tomb – the living one is not amongst the dead (24:5). The disciples hear the report from the two Marys and Joanna, but they don't believe what seems to them an idle tale from the mouths of women. Even Peter sees the empty tomb, but is still left wondering what has happened.

Two disciples are heading to Emmaus, about seven miles from the city. They go over the events again and again as they walk. A man joins them, seemingly ignorant of the events which are the talk of all Jerusalem. The disciples, sad, confused, their hope all but vanished, fill him in on the details. They have all the facts but, it seems, not the faith. The evidence, their own expectations and scripture all point to something major taking place on the third day, but they are afraid. Overwhelmed with feelings of sadness, loss and betrayal, they are not prepared to believe.

'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!' the stranger replies. What a rebuke! How can this stranger speak to them with such authority?

Hearing him explain the scriptures, showing them that God has been working in and through these events, their hearts burn. On reaching their destination, they invite the stranger to stay with them. As he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened and they recognise at last their risen Lord.

As the disciples demonstrate, paralysed by our own doubts and fear, we can be foolish and slow to see God at work in the world. The hope and the vital impact of the news of Jesus' resurrection is a lot to take in. It is the vindication of God's promises and proof of his saving power.

Only when we begin to see God's bigger picture through scripture and in the world will we know what it means to have hearts on fire. The sacrifice of Jesus, symbolised in the breaking of bread, enables us to know Jesus fully and to embark with him on a new life of hope and service.

As we walk with him may our hearts burn and our eyes open to a deeper understanding of the risen Christ and our service of him in the world.



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From Jerusalem to Calvary, the garden tomb to the house in Emmaus, these seven studies invite us to journey with Jesus along the difficult paths which took him to his death and beyond.

These difficult days and world-changing events call us to reflect on the new life Christ brings to the world and, in turn, on how we bring the new life of Christ to bear in our communities and the world in which we live.



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