HOW GOD BECAME KING

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Getting to the Heart of the Gospels

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SPCK

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To the faculty and students of

St Mary's College,

St Andrews

CONTENTS

PREFACE

It has been slowly dawning on me over many years that there is a fundamental problem deep at the heart of Christian faith and practice as I have known them. This problem can be summarized quite easily: *we have all forgotten what the four gospels are about*. Yes, they're about Jesus, but what exactly are they saying about Jesus? Yes, they're about God, but what precisely are they saying about God? Yes, they're about the beginnings of what later became known as Christianity, but what are they saying about that strange new movement, and how do they resource it for its life and work?

As I have both studied and written about Jesus and the gospels, and as I have tried to lead and teach Christian communities that were doing their best to follow Jesus and order their lives by the gospels, I have had the increasing impression, over many years now, that most of the Western Christian tradition has simply forgotten what the gospels are really all about. Despite centuries of intense and heavy industry expended on the study of all sorts of features of the gospels, we have often managed to miss the main thing that they, all four of them, are most eager to tell us. I have therefore come to the conclusion that what we need is not just a bit of fine-tuning, an adjustment here and there. We need a fundamental rethink about what the gospels are trying to say, and hence about how best we should read them, together and individually. And – not least – about how we then might order our life and work in accordance with them.

The problem of forgetting what the gospels are about is not confined to one segment of the church. Different branches – Catholic, Protestant, Reformed, charismatic, evangelical, liberal,

social-gospel, and the many segments of church life that bear two or more of these rather misleading labels at the same time – come at things from different angles. Naturally. But it is my belief that all of them, over many centuries now, have backed off from facing the full challenge of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It would be fascinating to chart the ways in which different parts of the church have read (and, in my view, misread) the gospels. But that would require a different sort of book and is in any case way beyond my competence.

Instead, I want to come at the question from the angle of the parts of the church I know best. After nearly twenty years in senior ministerial roles in the Church of England, seven of them as Bishop of Durham, and with fairly wide experience of traditions very different from my own, I think what I have to say reflects not a narrow or idiosyncratic viewpoint, but one at which many Christians from many traditions will nod with recognition. The question, then, is not only: Can we learn to read the gospels better, more in tune with what their original writers intended? It is also: Can we discover, by doing this, a new vision for God's mission in the world, in and through Jesus, and then – now! – in and through his followers? And, in doing so, can we grow closer together in mission and life, in faith and hope, and even in love? Might a fresh reading of the gospels, in other words, clear the way for renewed efforts in mission and unity? Is that what it would look like if we really believed that the living God was king on earth as in heaven?

That, after all, is the story all four gospels tell. I am aware, of course, that there are other documents that have been called 'gospels', and I shall say something about them in passing. But I am here dealing with the four that were recognized, from very early on, as part of the church's 'rule of life', that is, part of the 'canon': Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And the story that the four evangelists tell is the story, as in my title, of 'how God became king'.

This, I discover, comes as a surprise to most people, and an unwelcome shock to some. It appears, as we say today, counterintuitive; that is, the claim that God has become king doesn't seem to square with the world as we know it. 'If God is really king, why is there still cancer? Why are there still tsunamis? Why are there still tyranny, genocide, child abuse and massive economic corruption?' What's more, as we shall see, some people, not least some Christians, appear allergic to the very idea of God becoming, or being, 'king'. 'Isn't God as king triumphalist? Doesn't that lead us towards that dreaded word "theocracy"? And isn't that one of the problems of our day, not one of the solutions?'

Questions like that are important. But even if the gospel writers had heard us asking them, they would not have backed off from the claim they were making. To discover why not and to see what they might have said in reply to such comments, we have to take a deep breath and go back to the beginning.

The book proceeds in four parts, or stages. Part I introduces the problem as I see it and attempts to sharpen it up, so that readers come to see that there really is a problem that demands some fresh work and, if possible, some fresh attempts at a solution. The second part explores four dimensions of the canonical gospels that, again, have normally been screened out in modern Western readings and that we need to recover if we are to allow the gospels to tell us the story they intend to tell. Then, in Part III, we reach what is really the heart of the picture. Using the four dimensions set out in the second part, I try to show how the two vital themes so often separated, the kingdom and the cross, come together in the gospels, knock sparks off one another, and reinforce each other in setting out a claim that today's church has all but forgotten, a claim as much in what we call the political as in what we call the religious or spiritual sphere. That central combination of kingdom and cross then leads to further considerations about the

meaning of these themes in the light of the gospels' story of Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Then, in the final part, I come back to the great creeds and suggest that, though we have indeed allowed them to lull us into a frame of mind in which it's all too easy to screen out the central message of the gospels, it is just as possible, once we realize that mistake, to say or sing them as rich affirmations of that full message. This will generate some suggestions about how we should rethink our basic traditions of teaching and practice, so as to be more faithful to the documents that are, after all, at the heart of the Christian faith.

It may be worth pointing out at this introductory stage that this book is not primarily about Jesus himself. I have written plenty on Jesus within his historical context, including a recent short book, *Simply Jesus*.* I intend to go on working at that subject, but that isn't what this present book is about. The two questions that are interlinked at every point are: Who was Jesus (including, What did he do and say and think? Why did he die? and What happened next?)? And why did the four gospels tell his story the way they did? But these two questions are in principle also separable. Indeed (and I hope this doesn't sound too Irish), unless we hold them apart, we shall never be able to put them together. Having, then, addressed the Jesus question elsewhere, I turn now to address the gospel question once more, following, for instance, the treatment I offered in *The New Testament and the People of God*.† The gospel question is all the more interesting because there were, as I just mentioned, other documents in circulation by at least the second half of the second century that told the story very differently. (I think, of course, of the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*

**Simply Jesus: Who he was, what he did, why it matters* (London: SPCK, 2011).

†*The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), chap. 13.

and similar books.) Why did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do it in the ways they did?

In case anyone should think at this point that I am simply lumping the four canonical gospels together without paying proper attention to their very considerable differences, let me say right away that, though these four share a great deal with one another that is not shared with the non-canonical gospels, in other ways they are just as different from one another as they are from those other traditions.* Within the quartet itself, of course, a similar point is to be made. Matthew, Mark and Luke are much more like one another than any of them is like John, but they are still very different works. But my question is: What story is it they are trying to tell?

We could still ask this question, in fact, even if it could be proved that Jesus of Nazareth never existed, or never did most of the things ascribed to him, or was never crucified or raised from the dead. In such a case, of course, we would conclude that their story is fiction in the full sense. (All writing, all history, is 'fiction' in the sense that someone has constructed it, put it together, decided what to put in and leave out, and determined how to structure the whole. But the word 'fiction' is normally used, of course, to denote stories that do not correspond to anything that ever actually happened in real life.) But, even if the gospels were 'fiction' in that full sense, it would still be perfectly possible, and worthwhile, to ask: What story or stories do these writers think they are telling? That is the question, bracketing out issues of historical referent, that I shall be addressing in this book.

In the same way, I shall not be raising or addressing questions about the prehistory of the gospels or indeed about their date, authorship, or possible place of composition. This may be a disappointment to some. I have nothing but admiration for those who have devoted their lives to the study of gospel sources and origins.

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*See, again, my discussion in *The New Testament and the People of God*, chap. 13.

This study remains a hugely important subject within the larger enterprise. But again, for the purposes of this book, I am going to assume that it is possible, from the documents we actually have, as opposed to the hypothetical documents that may lie behind them, to ask the central question: What story did the gospels think they were telling? Even if the traditional picture proposed by most twentieth-century scholarship is correct, that Matthew and Luke both used, as basic sources, Mark, on the one hand, and a second source, generally known as Q, on the other; or even if one of the alternative proposals now on the table is preferred, perhaps the one in which Luke used Matthew as well as Mark and no Q is postulated; or even if matters are yet more complicated, with multiple oral and written sources now almost impossible to reconstruct – even if any of these proposals is correct, we are still left with the documents we actually have in front of us, and it still makes sense to ask what story they think they are telling.

The same goes for what is called form criticism. Again, the question form critics ask (What were the original forms in which the traditions were told and transmitted, and what can we learn about the early church from the study of these forms?) is a perfectly sensible and good question, but it isn't my question in this project. I think, for quite other reasons, that the way form criticism has normally been done needs a great deal of rethinking, but that is another story.*

In the same way – just to complete the holy trio – I am not doing what is often called redaction criticism. I am not lining up the gospels to see how, granted some theory about sources, they have altered one another's material and thereby tipped their hand, revealing their theological or ecclesial leanings. That too is a worthy discipline, though with the fragmentation of synoptic studies in recent years the quest for such 'redactive' hints is far more problematic than used to be thought. Rather, what I am doing

*On all this, see *The New Testament and the People of God*, chap. 14.

here is more like that second cousin of redaction criticism sometimes called composition criticism. We actually have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It makes good sense to ask of them, as it does of a Jane Austen novel or a Shakespeare play: What story was the author telling, and how did he or she go about it? That is the question I shall be trying to address. If we get the answer right, it might well have spin-off effects for those other disciplines, but that lies beyond the remit of this book.

This book has grown, in part, out of the Durham-based programme we named 'The Big Read', the brainchild of my dear friend and former colleague Bishop Mark Bryant of Jarrow. One of my tasks during that programme of large-scale Lenten Bible reading, launched in Durham in 2010, was to go around the north-east of England giving a series of open lectures about how to read the gospels (in that year, it was Luke in particular, though I have done similar talks, recorded and distributed, on Matthew in 2011 and on Mark in 2012). Doing those talks and discussing the material with local people made me realize then and there just how many misconceptions people have about Christianity in general and the gospels in particular. And if that is true for the faithful few who are prepared to turn out on a February evening, how much more true is it for those who stayed at home watching that most inappropriately named thing reality TV. It was the spring of 2010 that led me to believe that this book was necessary.

But the project reached its present shape in a memorable week in Salisbury Cathedral in May 2011, when I gave the four Sarum Lectures. I am very grateful to Sarum College for the invitation to give this series and to the principal and his colleagues for the warm hospitality I enjoyed in that delightful place. The book follows the line of the lectures, with the first three parts corresponding to the first three lectures. I wanted to make the fourth lecture particularly relevant for the many in my audience who

were engaged in parish and pastoral work; for the present book I have widened the scope quite a bit to include proposals I hope will be taken seriously by theologians as well as biblical scholars. The question of 'canon and creed', which underlies quite a bit of this book, has become quite urgent and controversial and needs to be addressed from the point of view of those of us who are actually working with the biblical canon itself rather than using the word 'canon' as shorthand for the systematic theology they already possess. The practical outworkings are then framed within that larger agenda.

In preparation for the Sarum Lectures, I gave preliminary statements at a conference at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, in October 2010. I then tried out the material at more leisure, later in the same month, with the clergy of the Diocese of Down and Dromore, Ireland. I am grateful to the Dean of the Divinity School, Professor Richard B. Hays, and the Bishop of Down and Dromore, the Rt Revd Harold Miller, for their invitations and hospitality. I also had the chance to sharpen the ideas up into an individual lecture that I gave, in various forms, at the Institute of Biblical Research in Atlanta, Georgia in November 2010 and at the Bristol School of Christian Studies in January 2011. Finally, I translated the Sarum Lectures into American the week after they were given and delivered them to church groups in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Nashville, Tennessee, in May 2011 and (in English again) to a gathering of naval chaplains in Hampshire in June 2011.

Wonderful memories surround each element of this rambling itinerary, and my gratitude goes out to the clergy and laity involved in its various stages (not least to Dr Michael Bird for his response to the Atlanta paper). In particular, I express my gratitude to Chuck and Deborah Royce for the use of their apartment in New York, providing some quiet space in which I was able to translate the material once more, this time from the lecture format into the complete book. That a book on the gospels should

be surrounded by so much gratitude and the memory of so much hospitality is only right. This too is part of their meaning.

I am also grateful to my editor at Harper, Mickey Maudlin, for his enthusiasm for this project and his guidance in holding back my earlier attempts to say too much too quickly. I hope that this finished product will encourage Christians from all backgrounds, as well as those looking over the fence and wondering just what the central Christian documents are actually all about, to read these explosive first-century books again with fresh eyes and to face once more the questions and challenges they actually offer, rather than the questions and challenges, important though they are in themselves, that we have regularly imagined they do.

The book is dedicated to my colleagues in St Mary's College, the Divinity Faculty of the University of St Andrews. It is no light thing to welcome into a faculty one who has been out of the academic mainstream for the best part of two decades, and it speaks volumes for their charity and faith that they have done so with open arms. Just as my lectures on the gospels, in the settings described above, were an attempt to relate the academic study of the gospels to the street-level life of the church, so I hope my new friends and colleagues here at St Mary's will see the book into which these lectures have grown as a kind of contribution in the other direction, bringing reflections that were occasioned by my work in the wider world into the bright light and searching scrutiny of the academy. There is, of course, much more to do, and I hope to return to the four gospels in a much fuller academic context before long. But this book may perhaps provide a start, and a signpost.

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