Andrew D. Mayes is Adviser for Spirituality and a parish priest in the Diocese of Chichester. He has lived in Jerusalem for some years, latterly as Course Director of St George's College. He is the author of *Spirituality in Ministerial Formation* (University of Wales Press), as well as *Holy Land?, Spirituality of Struggle* and *Celebrating the Christian Centuries* (all SPCK).

BEYOND THE EDGE

Spiritual transitions for adventurous souls

Andrew D. Mayes

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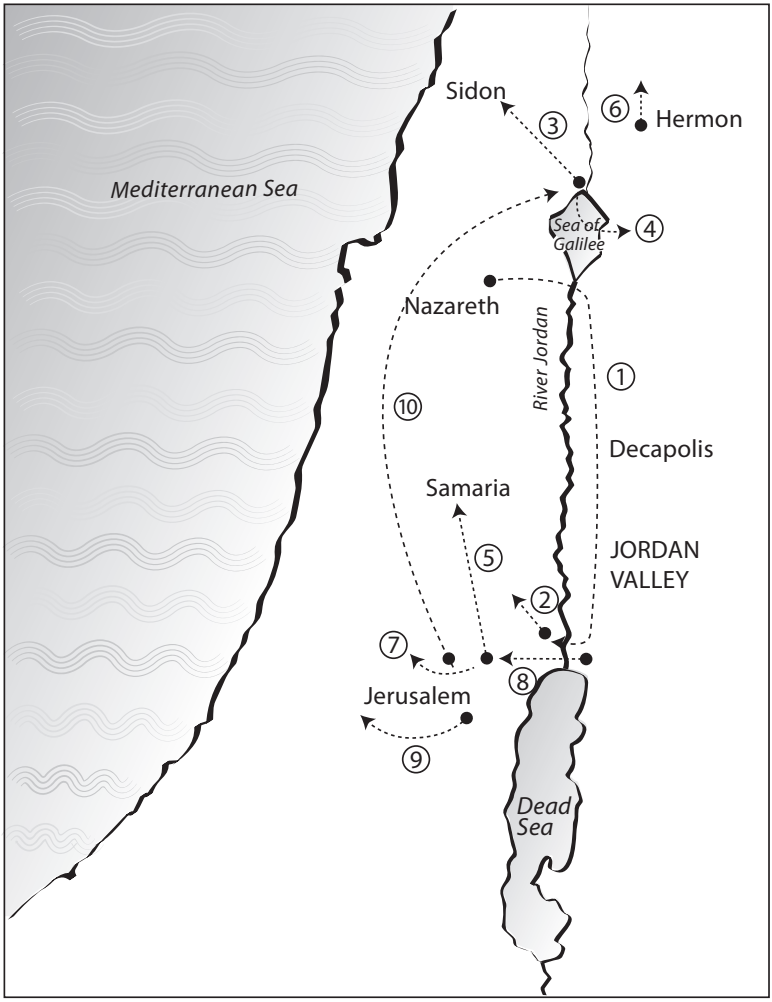

= Journey of Jesus

1. From Galilee to the Jordan Valley
2. Into the desert
3. From Galilee to Sidon
4. Across the Sea of Galilee
5. From Jerusalem to Samaria
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8. From the desert to the Mt of Olives
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Introduction

From across the centuries the summons reverberates in our souls today: 'Follow Me!' And where does Jesus go, that we might follow? He leads his disciples, then and now, into dangerous, demanding and life-transforming spaces. This book aims to bring together in a dynamic interplay three key ideas: the journeys of Jesus in the Gospels, where he is leading his disciples into risky locations; the concept of liminality or crossing a threshold to a new place of discovery; and the movements and transitions that might happen to us as we pray and advance in our adventure of discipleship. It is written for those unafraid to explore risky places in their odyssey of prayer: for seekers, for spiritual directors or those who walk with others in their prayer journey. It is for those who would call themselves pilgrims and wayfarers on a spiritual quest. Its aim is to stimulate and resource the journey. Let's look at the three big concepts in turn.

Jesus in motion

Soon after the resurrection, according to the Acts of the Apostles, Peter describes and sums up in a vivid, startling phrase his experience with Jesus. He refers to 'the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us' (Acts 1.21). This phrase captures the dynamic of Jesus' journeys. He was always crossing boundaries, in and out of one place or another.

One of the things that struck me when I was working in the Holy Land as Course Director of St George's College, Jerusalem was this: how often in the Gospels Jesus is in movement, in motion. Jesus in the Gospels is radically itinerant: he doesn't settle down in his three year ministry but is always on the move. Indeed, 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke

9.58). Jesus is a pilgrim and wayfarer. According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus became a traveller and an exile at just a few days old, a refugee, crossing the border into Egypt. Mark's Gospel emphasizes his travels: seven times he uses the phrase 'on the way' – a symbol of the journey of discipleship.[1] In his ministry he is peripatetic, always roving. He says: 'today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way' (Luke 13.33). And he is ever leading his disciples into liminal space: he leads them across borders, through boundaries, into a risky place, where they will be radically changed. This resonates with the figure of Christ the trailblazer, the *archegos* in the Letter to the Hebrews (12.2): Jesus is the pioneer, the forerunner, going on before in order to lead God's people into dangerous but transformative spaces. Now working as Spirituality Adviser to a large diocese, I am noticing afresh how relevant this is to the adventure of our spiritual lives.

In the Gospels we see that Jesus accompanies the disciples across the mountains of the north, to Tyre and Sidon, to the Mediterranean Sea, exposing them not only to the sea breezes but to new horizons in every sense. We see Jesus entering with the disciples the 'no-go' area, the place of heretics called Samaria. Jesus guides the disciples up Mount Hermon to get a glimpse of heaven itself and a sighting of the passion. On his final journey Jesus leads the disciples across the desert of testing – there is no other way from Jericho to Jerusalem except through the desert of the Judean wilderness, the primordial liminal space. Jesus takes his disciples across the numinous threshold of the Mount of Olives, the brink of Jerusalem.

In the Gospels Jesus is ever going places and seeking to take his disciples with him: 'where I am, you shall be also' (John 14.3). When we look at the Gospels, and appreciate the geography of the Holy Land, we see Jesus entering the liminal zone time and again. Sometimes he has to walk alone into this space, but significantly, at other times he takes his disciples with him and hopes the experience will change them radically. This gives fresh meaning to our understanding of the disciple as one who 'follows Jesus'.

Across thresholds, beyond borders

The concept of liminality is inspiring, unsettling and energizing. In entering liminal space you leave behind your former ideals and conventions, the status quo, the ordinary routines, inherited mindsets. You also leave behind your safety zone; you quit your place of security. You step out into a space where you will see things differently, where your world view might be shattered, where your existing priorities might be turned upside down. You cross a border and go beyond your usual limits. What had been a barrier now becomes a threshold, a stepping stone into a larger spiritual adventure. The liminal spaces into which Jesus leads us are places of radical unmaking and unlearning – uncomfortable spaces where we're called to be utterly vulnerable to God, and from which we will re-enter the world quite changed, even converted! The *limen* is the threshold, the place of departure, a springboard into a fresh way of doing things.

The concept of liminality derives from Arnold van Gennep's 1909 study, *Rites de Passage*, an anthropological study of ritual in communities.[2] He identified three stages in a process of transition: **separation**, involving a metaphorical death or breaking with past practices and expectations; **liminal state**, where those to be initiated – for example, young people into adulthood – must face challenges to their sense of identity and a process of re-formation; and **aggregation** or reintegration into the community as a changed person with a sharpened sense of values.

Victor Turner took this further in his studies among tribes in Zambia.[3] He noticed that the transitional phase was a testing process of undoing and remaking. The place of liminality thus becomes a place of ambiguity and confusion as one world is left behind – one thought-world – and things are shaken up before one can re-enter society with a different perspective, indeed a different social status. This is the place of 'anti-structure' – the opposite of the world of normality and of usual structures and roles, the place of status quo, 'business as usual'. But while it is a place of uncertainty, it is precisely here that the person clarifies his or her sense of identity and purpose – things are

discovered in the liminal zone that can't be found in the routines of normal life.

Our journey of faith

All this resonates strongly, I think, with our current experience. We find ourselves in a liminal space, right now. We live in an in-between time, betwixt and between. Old paradigms are breaking up, political regimes are in revolution, banking and economic systems are breaking down. In the Church, patterns of ministry are in flux. The parish system is crumbling. Worship and liturgy are being rewritten almost daily.

In postmodern society everything is questioned, no objective truths are to be entertained. We find ourselves in a space where we may long with nostalgia for old, familiar certainties and securities, for the traditional and safe. But we find, instead, that it is *precisely* here, in the risky and dangerous place, that Christ waits to meet us, to reveal himself to us.

As Hauerwas and Willimon have reminded us, we are called to live as aliens, exiles and pilgrims – that is to say, as liminal people – in this present world.[4] With the collapse of Christendom and a Constantinian model of Church and State, we find ourselves in a liminal zone that is bewildering and disorientating. Old familiar landmarks are passing and we are out of our comfort zone. But the liminal place is also the place of discovery, creativity, potentiality. The place of risk is a place of paradox: it is discomforting but strangely renewing. In the experience of dislocation we find ourselves. Deconstruction leads to reconstruction. In the time of exile and spiritual homelessness we rediscover the heart's true home.

We are called to go with Jesus into places of pain or confusion, into areas – literal and metaphorical – that will be at once testing and revelatory. This book can help us reflect on our own discipleship and identify times and seasons in our life where Jesus is wanting to remould and reshape us. Indeed, the experience of prayer itself can be a liminal state, demanding of us that we let go of beliefs or ways of doing things that have got us into a rut,

and beckoning us to fresh discoveries of God. In our personal lives and times of prayer we often find ourselves thirsting for something more. The signs that we are ready to embark on a spiritual adventure might begin with a sense of holy listlessness, a certain discontent with our present spiritual life, a holy dissatisfaction and a dawning sense that God is calling us forwards. In this book the concept of liminality becomes a hermeneutical key to look at familiar texts and a lens through which we bring into sharper focus and clarity the transitions to which we are called today in our spiritual journeying.

This journey

In Chapter 1 we will explore the significance of Jesus' coming to the River Jordan. We will reflect on the meaning of the forgotten fact that Jesus not only enters the water, he crosses it. It is truly a threshold of something new. What is happening to Jesus? How does he experience the bereavement and exhilaration of leaving things behind, moving out to a place where he is not known? What does that mean for us who would follow him?

In Chapter 2 we follow Jesus into the marginal lands of the Judean desert. We will discover it to be a place of raw beauty, a wild place where the wind blasts unmercifully at times and a place where, even today, the wild beasts howl. We will see how Jesus experiences exposure and enclosure in the wilderness. In Chapter 3 we venture with Jesus across northern ranges, to the coast of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7). Leaving behind the comfort zone of 'home', inherited prejudices, stereotypes and complacencies, we will discover new, unsettling and disturbing ways of seeing things, new ways of doing things – an alternative world view, represented in the Greek Syrophoenician woman.

In Chapter 4, with the disciples we quit Capernaum's shoreline of safety, crossing the demon-filled sea to the other side, place of the Gadarene demoniacs. This prompts us to look at our shadow side. Next, in Chapter 5, we reach beyond Samaria's border and join Jesus with the woman at Jacob's Well. We will be stirred to revisit and revise our usual image of God and self.

Chapter 6 summons us to ascend into the hills north of Galilee and join Jesus at prayer atop Mount Hermon. We experience how prayer can be transfiguring for us too.

Then we move to Jerusalem itself. In Chapter 7 we discover its forgotten threshold. In Chapter 8 we join Jesus in his climb towards Jerusalem (John 11), up the Mount of Olives, the eschatological, end-time mount (Zech. 14) and the threshold of the holy city. We join Mary and Martha in the shattering experience of turning inside-out their most cherished doctrines of God and humanity.

Chapter 9 takes us to Jerusalem's garden of struggle, Gethsemane. We trace Christ's movement from resistance and hesitation to submission and acceptance. We ask: What is holding you back? With what are you grappling right now? As the Good Friday event passes into the liminal darkness of Holy Saturday, we ponder the call into paschal prayer, the dark night of the soul, where God is actively at work.

Finally, in Chapter 10 we recall how the risen Christ goes before his disciples into Galilee, and explore how he is waiting to surprise us in liminal places in our own contexts.[5]

Using this book

The book is designed to be used by both individuals and groups. Questions at the end of each chapter are provided to stimulate personal reflection and group discussion. Three readerships are in mind. First, it is for Christians who are longing for movement and progress in their spiritual lives. Second, for those who support others on their spiritual journey – those who serve as spiritual directors, soul-friends or accompaniers. The appendix identifies different models of spiritual direction related to the transitions, and can be used profitably by spiritual directors' supervision or support groups. Liminality may turn out to be a key theme in spiritual direction. Third, the book will be a valuable resource for preachers, with its inclusion of the five Gospel readings for Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary (2014 and so on), widely used across the denominations.[6] For this reason it would also make an ideal resource for Lent: on Sundays churches can

look at the relevant Gospel passage and on weekdays remaining chapters can form the heart of a course for parish groups. It is recommended that course participants keep a journal or notebook in which to note and reflect on the transitions taking place in themselves as they undertake this life-changing journey.

1

Wading across the river

'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordon.' As always Mark puts it so succinctly (Mark 1.9), but behind these words lies a journey Jesus undertook with mixed feelings.

There was, of course, the outer journey. Jesus left the verdant terrain of the Galilee region and headed southwards down the great rift valley towards the arid desert. Lush green hills were replaced by the stark, sun-breached limestone cliffs. A comfortable and reassuring climate that enjoyed a generous share of rainfall gave way to the testing environment of the Jordan valley, where temperatures reach 45 degrees as the river flows to the lowest point on earth. Jesus was also quitting the traditional, inherited and often parochial views of Nazareth for a region known for its daring apocalyptic expectation: the Essene community of Qumran, only 8 km (5 miles) from the traditional site of the baptism, was supercritical of the Temple regimes and longed for God's imminent intervention in history.

An inner journey was taking place as Jesus undertook this 160 km (100-mile) journey to the Baptist at the Jordan. Exhilaration blended with apprehension. There was no doubt a sense of relief and release as Jesus left his hometown, the village of perhaps 200 souls, where he had spent his first 30 years. Now he was venturing towards something uncertain, exciting, unpredictable, a new mission. No doubt Jesus felt pangs of sadness as he parted from mother, siblings and friends in the village with whom he had shared so many years of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. He was breaking ties of kith and kin and, as we shall see, gaining an entirely new family. There was the pain of separation in his heart. Literally, he was leaving the familiar behind.

But there was also an overwhelming sense of destiny and vocation. This was a journey he had to make. The call was irresistible; a divine compulsion stirring within him. And with this came a deep sense of surrender to the divine will, symbolized in his plunging into the waters of the Jordan: the submersion bespoke a submission to the summons of God. The Jordan turns out to be a truly liminal space, the threshold of a new beginning. And although Jesus undertakes this journey alone, in the eyes of the biblical writers he is always a corporate, representative figure: the descriptions 'Son of Man', 'suffering servant' and Paul's 'new Adam' all suggest that Jesus is not one solitary figure but stands for all of us – his journey is ours too.

'Jesus came from Nazareth.' These four words encapsulate a range of transitions that Jesus is making. First, as we noted, he is relinquishing ties of family and friends, saying goodbye to long-established relationships. He will find himself saying 'whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14.26). He will ask: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' (Mark 3.33). He is creating a new set of relationships, with the disciples and the women who will be supporting him.

Second, Jesus is shedding expectations and job descriptions that he has grown up with. He has been working as a *tecton* – usually translated 'carpenter', the word denotes craftsman in wood or stone, even a builder. Scholars believe it highly likely that Jesus worked as a builder on the construction site of Sefforis – just 6.5 km (4 miles) north of Nazareth; it was being completely rebuilt at precisely the time Jesus was working. Indeed, Sefforis was the regional capital and was called by Josephus 'the jewel of Galilee'. Jesus is making the transition to a new kind of building task – it is interesting to note how often he uses the imagery of building in his sayings ('on this rock I will build my church', Matt. 16.18; 'a wise man who built his house on rock', Matt. 7.24). He expresses the cost of discipleship in a building metaphor: 'Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?' (Luke 14.28). In fact his mission can be summed up, like that of Jeremiah (Jer. 1.10), in terms of building

and demolition (Matt. 27.40). Jesus is shifting gear. He is starting a new work of construction. He is moving into a new set of priorities. He is now intent on building the reign of God.

Third, this is underpinned by his explorations into new ways of praying. In his years in Nazareth, prayer was based on the synagogue and in the family. There were also the regular annual festivals of the Temple in Jerusalem.[1] Now he is becoming itinerant: 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9.58). He is becoming a pilgrim and wayfarer, and traditional patterns of prayer will no longer be possible. Jesus will now pray in the hills (Luke 6.12) and in lonely desert-like places (Mark 1.35; 6.30–32). He is moving into a new spiritual experience, a fresh way of encountering God his Father. He is entering upon untried and challenging ways of praying.

Jesus 'was baptized by John in the Jordan'. What is the significance of the Jordan? Why could Jesus not be baptized in the Sea of Galilee, for example? He is positioning himself in precisely the place where the Hebrew people of old entered the Land of Promise: the Jordan is the threshold of Jericho and the very edge of the sacred land. Jesus is placing himself exactly at the point where the exodus journey ended and the tribes entered into their longed-for homeland under Joshua (Josh. 3). Like the Red Sea itself at the start of the exodus story, the Jordan changes from being a barrier to being a crossing-place, locus of fundamental transition. Here the people experienced a profound reshaping of their identity. They had been refugees and slaves, escaping from Pharaoh's tyranny in Egypt. Homeless nomads were becoming residents in a territory they cherished. Scholars consider that the designation 'Hebrew' derives from the concept of the *Habiru*, which denotes an inferior, landless, shifting population, without a name or identity.[2] But at the Jordan nobodies were becoming somebodies. In this passage through the waters of the Jordan, something changed in the soul of the people: they gained a new dignity and a new future; their wilderness wanderings had come to an end; now they were entering upon an entirely new phase of their existence. This experience of profound change anticipates phrases used by the prophet Isaiah:

> You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
> and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
> but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
> and your land Married.
>
> (Isa. 62.4)

The writer of the first letter of Peter is to echo this language in relation to the Christian vocation: 'you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people' (1 Peter 2.9, 10). Jesus is to receive confirmation of his call and identity at this selfsame place of transition: 'a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"' (Mark 1.11). In the waters of prayer we too can hear the Father's voice and discern our call: 'The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters' (Ps. 29.3).

Other aspects of the baptism of Christ speak to our transitions. A dove is seen flying over the scene, but this is not the dove of peace – you don't find this idea in the Bible. For Luke, who emphasizes the physicality of the dove ('the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove' (3.22)), doves mean only one thing: they are birds of sacrifice, whose blood was shed at Jesus' presentation in the Temple as a 40-day infant (Luke 2.24). The dove bespeaks the Holy Spirit but is inseparable from its association with pain and cost.

And so the baptism of Jesus is not the peaceful scene often depicted in Western art and in the religious imagination, such as in Piero della Francesca's masterpiece in London's National Gallery. The iconology of the Byzantine tradition gets closer to the truth, with its flowing waves of water. The baptism was a scary, liminal experience. The heavens were not gently opened up: the Greek text (Mark 1.10) carries the meaning of their being torn open, ripped apart. And the river itself? Today the Jordan at this point is a sluggish, slow-moving meandering stream, reduced to a trickle as 98 per cent of its waters have been diverted for agricultural and domestic use (otherwise they end up unusable in the Dead Sea). But in Joshua's day and at the baptism of Jesus, the Jordan was

a dangerous torrent – rapids and waterfalls were found where now it is a brackish stream. Psalm 42.7 refers to the Jordan: 'Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me.' It was a place of risk. Here Jesus prays (Luke 3.21). Here he receives a fresh sense of his identity from heaven itself. Here he decisively leaves behind the culture and mindset of Nazareth and enters on the most risky stage of his life. In his book *Transitions*, William Bridges describes transition as 'a neutral zone'.[3] This was no neutral zone for either Joshua or Jesus: Jesus was plunged into fast-flowing torrents, a zone of hazardous and life-threatening waters. His descent into the waters and re-emergence foreshadow the crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

What we don't normally appreciate is that Jesus does not just enter these swirling threatening waters, he wades across them: he makes a passage through the ferocious eddies and currents. He starts on the east bank at Bethany-beyond-Jordan (John 1.28) and he crosses to the west bank in order to enter the Judean desert. This makes the Jordan truly a *limen*, a threshold. For Jesus it was a place of letting go; in more than one way, an experience of transition. His journey can be ours. Two themes call out.

Vocational change

First, there are the transitions we must make in terms of our vocation and focus. Of course, it begins when we experience the trauma and joy of first leaving home. Later there are times in our life when we again need to break free from our Nazareth and leave behind routines of work or ministry that have become, perhaps, drudgery, a treadmill, fostering stagnation of soul not growth. There are times when a new vocation unfolds or a new set of priorities calls us to change gear radically. The experience of births and deaths can catapult us into the liminal zone, so too can being fired from a job or given a worrying medical diagnosis.

The changes we face in vocational shifts are varied. There is the experience of being deskilled, a letting go of one's past career and one's identity bound up in it, the loss of past confidences, where

discovered in the liminal zone that can't be found in the routines of normal life.

Our journey of faith

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