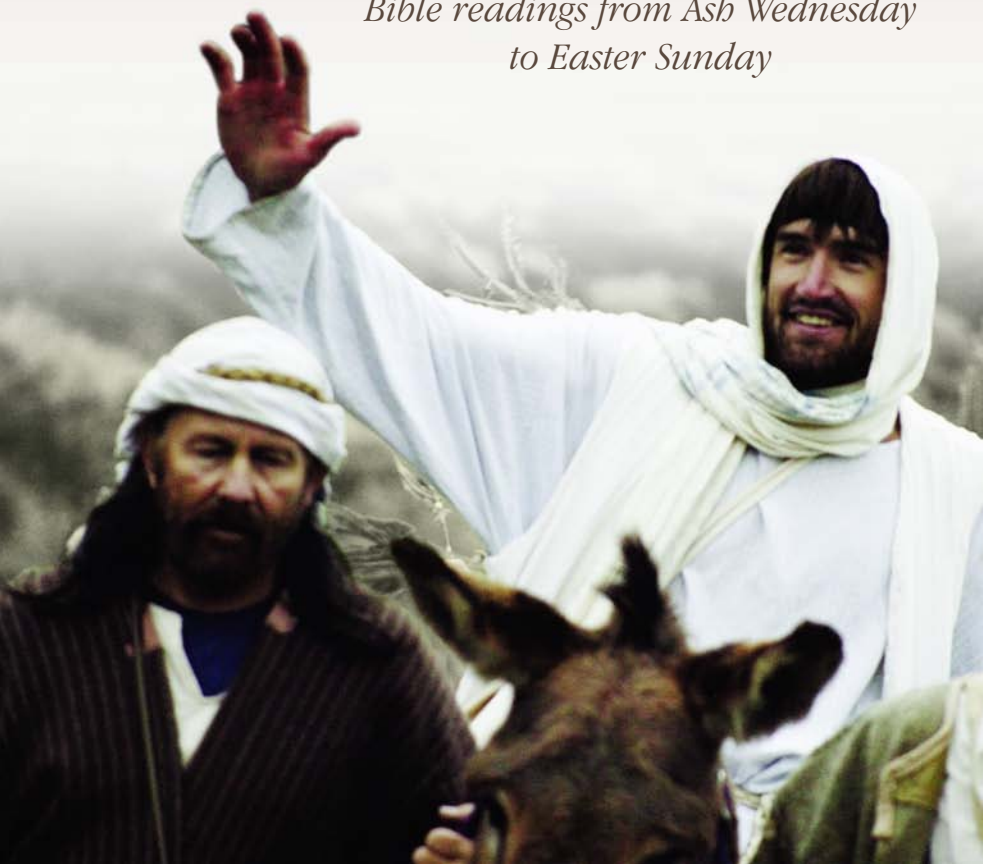


# DAVID WINTER

## JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

*Bible readings from Ash Wednesday  
to Easter Sunday*



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# INTRODUCTION

It was the 17th year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius—about AD29 in our calendar. He chose to spend many months of the year at his palace on the southern headland of the beautiful island of Capri, overlooking the blue waters swirling below. He probably felt rather pleased with himself. His empire was, relatively speaking, at peace—a peace enforced by a splendid system of law and the most finely trained and equipped (and, when necessary, ruthless) army in human history. From the northern plains of Europe to the Mediterranean sea, and from the wild islands of Britain to the deserts of Arabia and north Africa, Rome ruled.

There had never been an empire quite like this. Its architects and engineers built roads, aqueducts, theatres and arenas. Its lawyers, orators and judges administered the law. Having largely absorbed the culture of Greece, more and more people were educated and sophisticated. The Senate and the tribunes of the people were there, in principle at least, in the interests of a kind of democracy. Yes, Tiberius could justifiably feel that he was ruler of an empire that would last for ever.

As he hunted the wild boar on Capri, far away to the east in a remote and troublesome province of his empire twelve young men were walking with their leader along a road near Caesarea Philippi. They were about 30 miles north of Galilee, in a hilly area where the river Jordan had its source. As they walked, their leader put two questions to them, and the answer to the second one would have profound consequences not just for them but for the future of Tiberius' empire and eventually the whole world.

The leader was Jesus. The twelve young men (and they *were* young, most of them barely in their 20s) were his disciples.

This story begins with those questions and the disciples'

answers to them, and then traces the dramatic and painful consequences of that conversation on the road. The conversation itself would eventually set them on the path to Jerusalem, where the enemies of Jesus were waiting to pounce on the unorthodox young prophet from Galilee. It set in train a sequence of events which we shall see as three acts of a great drama—a drama that encompassed all the fundamental themes of every tragic story and every tale of triumph ever told. It included a quest, as many great stories do, but the quest was not for personal glory, wealth or the hand of a beautiful princess. It was a story of ‘rags to riches’, as the son of a carpenter from the obscure and sometimes ridiculed village of Nazareth changed the history of the world so profoundly that its most common calendar was to be measured in terms of years before or after his coming. It was a story of opposition overcome, of a dark and malign power to be faced, of tragedy and—ultimately—of triumph. It is the story of Jesus, but it is supremely God’s story, the record of an act of rescue on a global scale and with eternal consequences.

It is also, of course, our story—the story that shapes the faith and life of every Christian the world over. With the disciples we experience the awakening of faith in Jesus. With them we hear the challenge to follow him, wherever he leads us. With them we tread the path to Gethsemane and the time of testing, and to Golgotha, the place of crucifixion. With them we find the tomb empty on Easter morning and understand that this journey has no end, only eternal life. It is the story of our baptism, dying with Christ and rising with him to new life. It is the story of our eucharist, as the one who fed the crowds with bread and fish provides food for our spiritual pilgrimage. This Lent we are walking the gospel itself.

It is no exaggeration to say that the journey to Jerusalem of this group of young men (and, later, several women too) would change the world for ever. It could also be claimed that the story of that journey as related to us through the words of the writers of the four Gospels is, as one film epic entitled it, ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’. That story, those events and the group of disciples slowly

making their way southwards towards Jerusalem will be the subjects of our Lenten reflection.

The Sunday readings throughout the book will be on the theme of 'following'.

*Part One*

PREPARING FOR  
THE JOURNEY

## *Day 1: Ash Wednesday*

# CONFESSION AND COST

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READ LUKE 9:18–27.

*Key verse: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (v. 20).*

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The little group of twelve men and their leader, whom they called ‘Rabbi’ (Teacher) or ‘Lord’, strolled along in the afternoon heat. Possibly someone was laughing about the public’s reaction to what they had seen on their travels across Galilee—the healings, the amazing teaching, even the casting out of demons. If that were so, then the first question Jesus put to them simply followed on from the conversation. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘who do people say I am?’

At one level that was easy, because all it sought from them was an opinion. ‘John the Baptist’ was one suggestion—back from the dead, of course, because Herod had had him executed some time previously. ‘Elijah,’ offered another—the prophet who was expected to appear again before the coming of the Messiah. Even Jeremiah was suggested (see Matthew 16:14), the man who had prophesied the downfall of Jerusalem six centuries earlier. Jesus listened but made no response.

Then he asked a second question. This was a far more difficult one because it was one they had all been thinking about for a long time, and they knew it was the final clue to the whole enterprise that Jesus had called them to join. ‘But who do you say that I am?’

Perhaps there was silence for a moment as they all looked at each other, wondering if they should put into words the awesome notion that had begun to take root in their minds. Typically, it was Peter

who spoke first, expressing that elusive and frightening conviction that they were beginning to share. ‘You are the Messiah of God,’ he declared.

It’s hard for a Christian today, especially one from a Gentile background, to realize the enormity of what Peter had said. From childhood the disciples had learnt that the Lord God is One, so any notion that a human being could share in any way his divinity was genuinely shocking—blasphemous. They had also been taught to pray and look for the coming of the promised Messiah (‘Christ’ in Greek), God’s special and unique representative who would come in the fullness of time to redeem Israel and restore its kingdom—the kingdom of David. For long centuries the Jewish people had waited and prayed for his coming, through days of exile and suffering, through humiliation and slavery and, most recently, through three centuries, no less, of foreign occupation.

There had, it is true, been many who had claimed messiahship, especially in recent years. One after another they would appear, parade the stage for a time and then disappear, sometimes executed by the Romans, sometimes exposed as false by the people’s religious teachers and leaders. Possibly, in some quarters, the hope that a true messiah would ever come was fading. After all, John the Baptist had seemed to have all the necessary qualifications, and yet he had strongly refuted the idea that he was the Messiah.

Strangely, he had pointed to another, one who would come after him, whose sandals he wouldn’t be worthy to untie. He gave a few of his disciples an even more specific indication. When John baptized Jesus in the river Jordan, he told them, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). Among the twelve on the road near Caesarea Philippi were at least two of those who had heard his words, whatever they had thought he meant at the time—James and John. As they shared with the others the impact of the words Peter now spoke, they may well have thought of that moment by the banks of the Jordan.

Could it really be that the man with whom they had spent the last two years, hearing him speak, witnessing the healings and

other works of power, but also sleeping with him in the open air, seeing him sometimes tired, sweat-stained and hungry, was God's promised one? Could they have spent all those months in the close company of the Messiah? They had probably wondered at times and hoped and longed for certain evidence. Yet now they had, it seemed, collectively made up their minds. Jesus, their friend and leader and teacher, was also the anointed Servant of God, the Son of David and even, in those terrifying words added in Matthew's Gospel, 'the Son of the living God' (16:16).

If, for a moment, doubts and fears arose, it would at least be understandable. After all, John the Baptist himself, who had borne such a clear witness to Jesus at his baptism, later seems to have entertained doubts. He sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Luke 7:19). Jesus did not send a 'yes' or 'no' answer, but told them instead to return to John with an account of what they had seen: the sick healed, the lame walking, the blind restored to sight and the poor receiving the good news. Presumably he was confident that John would draw from that evidence the assurance he sought.

The twelve had seen similar sights, of course, over and over again. They can have had no doubt that Jesus was a mighty prophet but, until this moment, even they had held back from any open confession that he was the Messiah of God. Now the words were spoken. What would the reaction of Jesus be?

When it came, it was as unexpected, as unpredictable, as everything else they had heard from him from the moment when he first enlisted them. Mark and Luke simply record that as soon as Peter had spoken, Jesus issued a strict warning that they were not to tell anyone else what they had discovered—the 'messianic secret' that is such a feature especially of Mark's Gospel. He went on to introduce them to a new and disturbing element in his teaching. 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised' (Luke 9:22).

Jesus then had some stern words for all the crowd—presumably, the people who had been attracted by his earlier teaching or by the miracles of healing and had followed him as he travelled. If they truly wanted to become his followers, he warned, then they would need to ‘deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow’ him (v. 23).

‘Taking up the cross’ seems a clear enough instruction to Christians today: we are to share Christ’s sufferings, to be ‘crucified with Christ’, in the language of Paul. For Jesus’ immediate hearers, however, its meaning would have been rather different. They were familiar with the concept of ‘carrying the cross’ because it was a normal part of the punishment of those who had been sentenced to crucifixion. As one element in the whole degrading process, the condemned person was required to carry the crossbeam on his shoulders to the place of execution. Probably everyone in the crowd, no matter how young, would have seen it happen, because crucifixions at the time were hideously frequent. When Jesus was a boy of about twelve, the Roman general Varus crucified 2000 men and boys alongside the road leading from Nazareth, in retaliation for an uprising against the occupying power. To take up the cross, then, meant to share its humiliation, to shed any notion of superiority or status. Only by ‘losing their lives’ in this way would they truly find them.

This, Jesus said, was what it would mean for them if they wished to follow him all the way—the way that led inevitably to Jerusalem.

### *A reflection*

*As we start our Lenten journey as followers of Jesus, it’s probably a good idea to be absolutely clear about the identity of the person we are following. Having walked with Jesus for a couple of years, the disciples were clear about their answer: he was the Messiah of God. That wasn’t the end of the learning, any more than there is an end to learning for us—but it’s a very good start. Jesus is the one whom God sent to be the Saviour of the world.*

‘Twelve young men were walking with their leader along a road about 30 miles north of Galilee, in a hilly area where the river Jordan had its source. As they walked, their leader put two questions to them, and the answer to the second one would have profound consequences not just for them but eventually for the whole world. The leader was Jesus. The twelve young men (and they were young, most of them barely in their 20s) were his disciples.’

This book follows the journey of Jesus and his followers to Jerusalem—the story of the culmination of his ministry in the events of Good Friday and Easter, the story of the ‘good news of God’ for the whole world. It is this story that shapes the faith and life of every Christian. As we reflect on these events, like the disciples we can experience the awakening of faith in Jesus and hear the challenge to follow him, wherever he leads. With them we can tread the path to Gethsemane and Golgotha, and on to the empty tomb and new life.

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This book can also be used for group discussion and study



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