

## ***Review: Approaching the Cross: John's Gospel Witness to Jesus Dying and Rising***

“Bishop Robert Gillies’ *Approaching the Cross* is rooted in a life’s experience of Christian ministry as an Anglican priest and Bishop of Aberdeen within the Scottish Episcopal Church. It is a book that is at once practical, prayerful and intellectually alert, and it places Bishop Gillies within the tradition of what Rowan Williams has defined as those ‘Anglican identities’ that lie at the heart of the genius of Anglicanism, from Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor to Michael Ramsey and Williams himself. In other words, this is a work of profound spirituality that carries its learning lightly and speaks directly to our experience of the Bible within a living, contemporary world.

These meditations on the journey of Holy Week, based on readings from the Fourth Gospel, began as addresses given while Gillies was bishop of the far-flung diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney. They encourage us, in good ancient tradition, to follow dramatically and imaginatively with Jesus and his disciples and the crowds of Jerusalem through the last days in that city before the crucifixion and the resurrection. With them I was drawn back in Christian literature to the liturgical pilgrimage of the fourth-century Spanish nun Egeria in Jerusalem as well as to the imaginative engagements of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, for Gillies writes within a deep strain of Christian spirituality that reaches back to the very earliest period of the Church. A close companion piece in more recent times within Anglicanism is Bishop Kenneth Stevenson’s *Jerusalem Revisited* (1988), on the liturgical meaning of Holy Week. But in these pages there is something different.

The role of the imagination is not emphasized often enough in the devotional lives of Christians, yet it is central and necessary. As we travel again, year by year, through Holy Week from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, it is easy to forget the pain and perplexity of Jesus’ disciples, of Mary of Magdala, of those virtuous Jews Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, for they knew nothing as the days went by of the triumphant assurance of Easter and the resurrection. Rather, they simply watched their hopes and beliefs in Jesus disintegrating around them. It is to this condition that we are here drawn in our imaginations. Gillies’ eye for detail in the text of the gospel takes us back to the complexities, the varieties of viewpoint, the sheer mystery of the events that have become so familiar to us, bathed now in the Christian light of their final triumphal outcome. But here we return to the complex, perplexing figure of Judas Iscariot, who never knew the resurrection, and who, in Gillies’ gentle theology, is drawn up by Jesus from the depths of hell on Holy Saturday. Judas is not Dante’s everlastingly tortured felon, but a soul forgiven by God. We stand beside Mary who mistakes the risen Jesus for the gardener – and perhaps that is what indeed he is, the one who recovers a lost paradise garden of Eden for God’s children.

Throughout the journey that is taken by these exercises, Gillies invites us into moments in his own ministry and Christian experience or reading, grounding the reading of the scriptural narrative and the journey of Passiontide in the common experiences of life and death – of floods in Aberdeenshire, of times in hospital, of moments in reading that suddenly shed an unexpected light on things. These common events then reverberate with the experiences of the gospel narrative itself, read as human experience of divine mysteries, partial, often misunderstood, but subject to moments of revelation as the light of truth dawns.

Bishop Gillies writes with dignity and humility, with the skill of the pastor and the insight of the scholar. *Approaching the Cross* deserves a wide readership.”