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There was a time when the cross was an answer. For the early Church the cross explained why there needed to be a Church at all: Israel had rejected Jesus the Messiah, and the Roman Empire had killed him – so a new institution, neither chosen people nor worldwide superpower, arose to worship the crucified Lord. For Christendom (the many centuries in which Church and state asked the same questions and reached the same conclusions) the cross explained how God in Christ had dealt with eternal matters, leaving us to deal with earthly ones. For the time of the West's expanding empires, the cross explained why the benighted ones would one day thank us for our invasions so much: for we knew the grace of God, utterly portrayed in the crucified Jesus, and they did not.

Today the cross is no longer an answer. Today the cross is a question. It's a question about God, about existence and about us. In the days when the cross was an answer we didn't need to pay attention because we already knew the answer. The answer was that Christianity confirmed everything we already believed about existence. Now that





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the cross is a question we fear to pay attention because we find the question so frightening and we're terrified to face it because we are afraid it may not have an answer. And our faith will be hanging by a thread.

Some years ago, when I served at Duke University Chapel in North Carolina, I used to share in the service of Tenebrae. I found it one of the most memorable services of the year. At around 7.30 p.m. on the evening of Good Friday there would be a single reading, followed by a sermon; then, interspersed with Passiontide hymns, there would follow a series of readings, and, after each reading, one of seven huge candles placed on the altar would be snuffed out. Finally the congregation of around 1,300 would listen, in darkness and silence, as the tower bell tolled 39 times. That silence was louder than any music or words.

The question that exercised those preparing for the service was, what should happen after the great silence? The tradition had been that a candle would be brought forward slowly from the back of the chapel, more than 50 rows back, a journey taking a minute or so, and that the person bearing the candle would light a small candle that was placed to one side of the altar, at a lower level. It was a beautiful and compelling moment. The symbolism was unmistakable: 'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1.5). From this flame, the whole world would shine in glory. God's love had been snuffed out, but you can't snuff out the nature and destiny of all things. Humbly, quietly, but relentlessly, it would reassert itself.





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The trouble was, it was an action befitting a Saturday night Easter Vigil rather than a Friday night Tenebrae. It seemed to me to represent a profound reluctance to stay with the unresolved, tragic and terrifying experience of Good Friday evening. In subsequent years various endings were tried; but in the end it was decided that there could be no conclusion: the bell should toll, there should be silence; and, after a solemn interlude, there should be sufficient side-aisle lights lit to enable those who wished to do so to leave in safety.

This liturgical question goes right to the heart of the theology of Good Friday. Was the cross an agonizing, horrifying but ultimately successful and triumphant enterprise, in which a limitlessly-loving and inexpressibly-gracious saviour secured our eternal salvation by assuaging the rasping hunger of death and satisfying the just demands of recompense for sin? Or was it, rather, the tragic, cruel and ugly epitome of the world's failure to embrace the utter goodness of God embodied in Christ, an ending so shameful, so isolated, so apparently final, that it exposes the Church's deepest, yet invariably suppressed, fears about the absence, defeat or non-existence of God? If it was the former, the solemn entry of a candle is an appropriate and tender sign of completion, celebration and first-fruits of redemption. If it was the latter, the candle is a sign of our denial of the cost, risk and full horror of the cross, a hasty and perhaps shallow attempt to turn tragedy into comedy, to resist pathos and rush to a happy ending.

If Christian understanding of the cross errs on one side





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or the other, it must surely be the latter. The cross does not invite us to dodge the searing questions of suffering, doubt and evil, in the assured confidence that it was all part of The Plan; instead the cross calls us to go to the bottom of the slough of despond, knowing that the resurrection (though predicted) would lose its power if anyone had seriously seen it coming. Jesus' words from the cross are the utterances of an agonized and dying man; they lose their poignancy if they're simply transposed into a story where everything comes right in the end. The cross is not an answer that leaves us comfortable and assured: it's a question that leaves our faith hanging by a thread.

Christians regard the cross as the most awful event in human history. Let's survey the scene. Here is a naked man. He's been beaten to pulp. He's bleeding hand and foot. His arms are spread-eagled so he can't fight off the flies or wipe away the sweat and the blood. He's practically alone. He's more or less isolated. He's totally humiliated. It's almost impossible to look at a picture of such agony and misery.

And at the climax of this ghastly scene, John's Gospel tells us, this man says one single word: 'Finished.' This is the word that seems to validate the upbeat version of Good Friday – the one that emphasizes the word 'Good.' Let's ponder for a moment the host of meanings of that word. Finished. The dissertation's finally edited and handed in. Finished. The marathon's run and I'm totally done in. Finished. The relationship's over and she's told me she doesn't love me. Finished. The work of art is completed and ready for display. Finished. The counselling has run its





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course and I can face the world without fear or bitterness or anger. Finished. I've served my sentence and I can come out of prison. Finished. I've been told I've no longer got a job and needn't come back to work. Finished.

But it's dangerous to rush too quickly to calling Good Friday 'Good'. Surely Jesus' climactic words from the cross must be ironic. This isn't the way the story was supposed to end. Consider the heavenly host of angels in the skies above Bethlehem singing of peace on earth. Surely this wasn't the way they imagined it would all turn out. Recall the crowds on Palm Sunday waving branches and shouting Hosanna. Surely they weren't thinking of this apocalypse five days later. A lot of other words might capture it. Ruined, betrayed, wasted, lost, destroyed, devastated, ravaged, spoiled, wrecked ... but not 'finished'. What might this word 'finished' mean? Let's look a little closer. Let's see if we can discover what is finished by Friday afternoon. The cross polishes off not just a facile rendition of The Plan, but almost everything else that characterizes a too-easy codification of Christianity. Let's snuff out the seven candles on that altar of superficial tidiness one by one.

One thing that's finished is the blond Jesus with the constant smile, the loose-fitting toga and the baby lamb constantly around his neck like a primal life-jacket. That would be the Jesus whose picture perched above my bed as a child. The one that loves the little children. There's nothing sentimental about the cross. There's no guitar-playing, commune-dwelling, tie-dying, knitted-yogurt-eating, country-road-singing, long-haired-lover-



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from-Liverpool, John-Denver-bespectacled Jesus in the face of Good Friday. Jesus is mutilated. He's taunted. He's asphyxiated. The Jesus of our projections, the kind friend, the handsome suitor, the Mr Fix-it, the husky organic farmer, the country sage, the wandering minstrel – they all die at the foot of the cross. The rose-tinted Jesus of soft-focused promotional paraphernalia is gone. Finished.

Another thing that's finished is the conquering Jesus with the righteous fist, the Jesus whom the Crusader thought he was upholding as he smashed the head of the infidel, the Jesus whom the Inquisition believed it was promoting by torture and cruelty, the Jesus proclaimed by conquistadors with colonial mind-sets and rapacious ambitions, the Jesus that demands to seize control of the government, the Jesus that obliterates other religions from the face of the earth, the Jesus whose name is invoked to justify one race or people or gender giving themselves sanction to oppress and marginalize and laud it over others. On Good Friday Jesus doesn't conquer. He's humiliated. He's defeated. He's dragged through the streets like a slave or a dog. The Jesus that gives credibility to human power-grabs is gone. Finished.

And that's by no means all. The Jesus that makes for good citizenship and stable social relations is finished too. Jesus died a criminal's death. We can plead his innocence as long as we like, but in the eyes of the Sanhedrin he was acting as if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who was bringing Israel's long exile to an end. And that meant he had to die. And in the eyes of the Romans he was





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a rabble-rouser and a potential king, and that made him guilty of a capital crime. Jesus was a good citizen of the kingdom of heaven, but not a very reliable citizen of Rome. So the meek Jesus that believes in law and order, the mild Jesus that instructs children to be good and kind and to obey their parents, the Jesus that doesn't want to rock the political boat or disturb the neighbours – that Jesus dies in the face of the cross. That Jesus is finished.

And what about the Jesus of The Plan, the Jesus of the mathematical equation – the Jesus that says, ‘Take one drop of total human depravity, add one pinch of utter divine grace, mix with one broken law and blend in one innocent death, and then subtract one angry devil’? That Jesus, who seems subject to some extraneous logic invisible to the eyes of the disciples but obvious to the well-informed cosmic legal historian, that Jesus disintegrates in the face of the circumstantial detail of the cross. If Jesus were simply a component in a mathematical equation or legal formula that got us off the devil's hook, then why would the Gospels tell us so much about the disciples who deserted him, the women who followed him, the mother who loved him, the sinners he forgave, the sick he healed, the poor he accompanied, the blind he led? By the time we get to the cross the Gospels have shown us enough about Jesus not just to show us how much he loves us but to make us love him. You don't love a formula or an equation. The cross shows us not forensic symmetry but wondrous love. The Jesus of the divine bargain is finished.

And then there's the Jesus that watches idly by while





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earthquakes destroy countries, while ISIS and Al-Qaeda plague a generation, while civil war becomes a way of life across the world, while loved ones develop cancer, while drought afflicts continents, while hurricanes and tsunamis wreck households and livelihoods and cities. Nero watched from afar and fiddled while Rome burned; but Jesus isn't looking idly through some heavenly telescope. Jesus is suffering an agony as bad as any known to human experience. Jesus isn't tucked up in the sky, peering down from a safe distance: he's in the middle of a human train-crash, the glass and wheels and rails and twisted metal all contorting his body and piercing his soul. If you ever look up to the sky and shout 'Oh God, why?' you're looking in the wrong place. You need to be looking into the face of the crucified Jesus. That distant remote-control God has got nothing to do with Christianity. In the face of Good Friday, that Jesus is finished.

And here's a painful one. The Jesus that belongs to the Church, the Jesus that gives an affirming thumbs-up to everything Christians set out to do, the Jesus that makes a congregation a circle of holiness and a cradle of wholesomeness – that Jesus withers in the face of the cross. It's not clear when the Church begins. Maybe when Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom. Maybe when Jesus says to Peter, 'Feed my Sheep'. Maybe when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, 'I send you'. Maybe when the Holy Spirit comes down at Pentecost. But a good candidate for the beginning of the Church is right here at the cross, when Jesus hands his mother over to the care of





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the beloved disciple. You can see Mary representing Israel and the beloved disciple representing the Church, and Jesus' instructions portraying the inextricable destiny of the two. Not a glamorous scene, is it? This is two fragile figures amid a vista of apocalyptic devastation. Not exactly a mega-church bent on growth. Lends a whole new irony to Jesus' words, 'Where two or three are gathered, I am with them,' doesn't it? In the face of the cross, there's no place for the self-congratulatory Church that's holier than God. There's only a place for church that looks like Jesus. Any other Church is like any other Jesus. It's finished.

But here's the most important one of all. The cross confronts us with the fragility of Jesus. He's no superman who leaps down and says, 'Only joking!' He suffers to the end. We wonder how this awful spectacle can possibly be necessary for our salvation. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder whether this tiny, broken, wasted body can possibly be the body of God. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder how any joy, any hope, any glory can possibly emerge from this hideous catastrophe. We're supposed to wonder that. We wonder why God doesn't utterly reject us after we've shown the very worst that we can do. We're supposed to wonder that. All of those wonderings should be part of our faith, our imagination, our daily prayer and our compassionate hearts. But for all our wondering and pondering, one thing is utterly clear. When we see the pain, when we feel the grief, when we look upon the loneliness, when we touch the wounds, when we hear the cries, we know, we know that God will go to any lengths





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for us, God will never be separated from us, that loving us is written into God's DNA, that there's no part of God that has any desire to be except to be with us, that Jesus is the embodiment of the way God's destiny is wrapped up in us for ever. Any other notion of God, any other speculation about God's wishes, any other idea about what lies at the heart of God is gone. Over. Dispelled. Finished.

Jesus' final words: 'Finished.' His life is finished. His ministry's finished. The scriptures are finished. The reconciliation of God and creation is finished. And a host of misconceptions are dispatched at the same time. Jesus isn't a cosy companion. He's not a triumphalist conqueror. He's not a law-abiding do-gooder. He's not legal formula. He's not a heartless onlooker. He's not a pretext for Christian self-satisfaction. All those idolatries are finished. They're snuffed out like a line of candles, one by one. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished. Finished.

Everything's finished. Everything's desolate. Everything's laid waste. Everything's lost, except the heart of God laid bare. And if we're not seduced by a comforting saviour, if we're not mesmerized by a merciless hero, if we're not domesticated by a model citizen, if we're not obsessed by a mathematical equation, if we're not alienated by a distant deity, if we haven't fled from the cross like most of the Church for most of its history, we might just get close enough to glimpse that sacred heart laid bare.

Conventional faith, as represented by these seven snuffed-out candles, is left hanging by a thread. I don't set out to interrogate customary models of atonement, but





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they do come in for quite a bit of scrutiny in these pages, because my understanding of the cross resists any account of salvation that's tidier and cleaner and more assured than Jesus. I'm not seeking to put further doubts in my readers' minds than are already there. But what I do seek to do is to name and explore the vivid feelings of betrayal, despair, 'lost-ness', shame, fear, sorrow and profound, perhaps total, abandonment that Christ experiences in his Passion, and at least hint at the ways these feelings are mirrored in the lives of my readers. The cross is the gospel – but it's not the whole of the gospel. This is what the worshipper rediscovers every Holy Week. If a person goes to church on Good Friday and doesn't return on Easter Day, they may expect to find themselves in an unresolved state of turmoil, confusion and dismay. If a person appears at church on Easter Day without having been present on Good Friday, they may expect to sense they're in the midst of relief for which they knew not the preceding anxiety, joy for which they shared not the foregoing terror, plenitude for which they perceived not the former scarcity.

But the result of the way I strive to resist any suggestion that the cross, while painful and ghastly, was part of a Plan and therefore, ultimately, fine, is that this is a book not just about how the cross addresses the greatest challenges to the Christian faith, but about how it does so by redescribing how salvation comes about. Only when we recognize that an easy narration of the cross is finished, and our faith is hanging by a thread, can we appreciate how the cross represents our salvation.



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In this book I explore six questions that I believe the cross asks us – all of which are different versions of the same question. In each case I believe the cross leaves us hanging by a thread. I begin with the question of story and history. There's no use pretending we have any access to the cross except through the accounts the Gospels give us. And those accounts are subject to the same limitations and scrutiny as any historical documents: they reflect the bias of their authors, they're locked in the era in which they were written, they're a restricted subjective view rather than an unlimited objective one. So this is the place to begin: we have to enjoy, to relish being bearers of a story, rather than desperately trying to make a story tell us things no story can. If we want to turn the cross into a conventional history, our faith will be left hanging by a thread; instead, we need to discover what it means for God to enter into our story, and to be moved to enter into God's story.

I then move to the question of trust. Faith is fundamentally about trust. Trust isn't the opposite of knowledge, for that presupposes a false notion of knowledge. Knowledge isn't certainty: it's more like apprehension of an array of dots that one's in the habit of connecting together, rather as stargazers join together stars into constellations. The dots are there, but the joining is largely convention. The difference between convention and faith isn't as great as is often supposed. Nonetheless trust is the explicit recognition of relying on what cannot be known – particularly as experienced in interpersonal relations. This human level has always been important: but it has become





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especially so in recent decades in the West, as acceptance of institutions and hierarchies has been challenged, and authority-structures have been dismantled. What remains is interpersonal trust: but the cross deals such trust a savage blow.

The third question is that of mortality. The simplest description of the conventional portrayal of the cross is that it is the way God overcomes the burden of sin and the curse of death. In John 11 Jesus says, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.' But plenty of people have lived and believed in Jesus – and nonetheless died. Does death expose existence, as Macbeth supposed, as no more than 'a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more'? Is life simply 'a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing'? If so, faith is a curious sideshow on a fundamentally futile circus. But again, that question can't be addressed by changing the subject or diverting attention to something urgent or entertaining. The question is at the heart of the cross.

The fourth question is, consequently, purpose. I begin with story, because it's story that gives us the cross in the first place. I then move to trust and death, because they are the two most visceral issues that face human beings. But there are two less pressing, but equally important questions to address. The first is meaning and purpose. This is the moment to widen the lens from the intensity of human experience. I do so in two ways, by looking at



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the earth's place in the universe of time and space, and by considering humanity's place in a Darwinian notion of evolution. These are perhaps the two greatest challenges to the self-importance and self-centredness of any human story. They jeopardize the validity not just of Christianity, but of most alternative human narratives. As elsewhere, I want not to wince as they leave faith hanging by a thread, but to examine that thread in the light of the cross and find it none other than the way to life and peace.

The fifth question, more than the others, concerns social location. It's about power, and about the way knowledge and influence and faith are shaped – and in the view of some, determined – in terms of power relations. Questions about the cross are not the same for everybody: they differ depending on your present and historic connection to sources and uses of power. This can lead to hopeful activism or angry cynicism. But it's so much in the contemporary imagination that one can't consider the cross without reflecting on how power works, and whether its dynamics dominate, undermine, or are subverted by faith.

The final question, that of love, intentionally circles us back to the opening two questions – story and trust, against the backdrop of the third question, death. Elsewhere I've argued that 'with' is the most important word in theology. Here I illustrate that assertion in narrative form, in ways that touch also on meaning and to a lesser degree on power. The last question is designed to draw together the insights of all the foregoing questions and explorations. It's facile to





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move too quickly to talk of love without considering the five questions that precede it; but absurd to try to explore the cross without attempting to fathom what wondrous love is this. By the end, the hope is that the reader joins the words of Samuel Crossman, and resolves: Here might I stay and sing.

The last chapter – the seventh candle – doesn't seek to answer a question: it attempts to stay and sing in the place created by the sixth chapter. Too many books or arguments about the truth of faith or the nature of salvation end where you want them to start – make a case, but stop when that case has been made. Here I try to stay still for a while, and dwell in the implications of what the sixth question has led us to. I've the given the seventh chapter the same title as the first chapter, so as to show that the argument ends where it begins. It is, in T. S. Eliot's celebrated words in 'Little Gidding', 'to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time'. Rather like the six days of creation, which end with the sabbath, that contemplates and completes the six days, this short book is taken up with six questions, and concludes with a chapter of dwelling, that seeks to amplify and embody the proposals that forego it.

