1 | Introduction

The Landscape of Devotion

Jesus circulates. Stories about him, images of him, hopes and ideas concerning him are endlessly picked up, adapted, and passed on; their variety is bewildering, the weave of their interactions unmappable. Scriptural texts depicting him are re-read in slowly changing translations and rapidly changing settings, the images of Jesus that they yield shifting hue in the light of continually modulating expectations. Liturgies that celebrate him are revised, whether subtly or dramatically, and even where they remain stable are experienced in as many ways as there are participants. These scriptural and liturgical imaginings are surrounded by, and entangled with, any number of others, from slowly crumbling mosaics in Byzantine domes to the ephemeral flicker of cartoons shared on social media. And all of these stories and images and patterns of interpretation circulate in ways constricted and enabled by the shifting assemblages of our world: trade routes and borders, empires and revolutions, ecologies and commodities, inequalities and patterns of belonging. There never will be, and never could be, any exhaustive answer to the question, 'Who is this Jesus whom Christians worship?', any way to capture or to tame all that circulates under his name.

This is a book about this whole kaleidoscopic landscape of imaginings of Jesus. I ask what sense Christians like me can make of this landscape, and how we might learn to navigate it. I explore what it means for me, and what it might mean for others, to

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continue worshipping and following the Jesus who can wear so many faces and call with so many voices.

I ask what it means to continue worshipping Jesus as one becomes aware of the intensity of conviction with which entirely incompatible imaginings of him are defended, and of the vast efforts put into demonstrating the authenticity of this Jesus over that, mine over yours, ours over theirs. I ask what it means to keep on worshipping when, in the light of all this variety, the contingency and precariousness of each of our imaginings come into view.

I ask what it means to keep on following Jesus as one becomes aware of the entanglement of each form of our imagination in all that surrounds it: the ways in which political context and personal history, cultural developments and religious experiences, church tradition and unforeseen events all go on shaping what one sees when one thinks of him.

I ask what it means to persist with devotion to Jesus even when one becomes aware of just how much harm has been done in his name, and of the ways in which every pattern of life gathered around him is, in part, both damaged and damaging. I ask what it means to persist with devotion to him if one loses faith in the possibility of marking out any enclave of pure following, free from complicity in evil.

There will be many, of course, for whom other questions than these are more urgent – questions, perhaps, about how to sustain a form of devotion that will strengthen them in a situation of oppression, or about the means to resist forces colonising an endangered form of Christological imagination. In my own context, however, the questions I have named have become pressing because they are posed with some urgency by the intractable disagreements and the contested movements for change that mark my church, the Church of England. There are many strands to this situation that I could name, but quite contingently I happen to be particularly aware of two: movements within and around my church that I regard as liberative, but that others question. I am thinking of the fight

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against racial injustice in the church, and the fight for the fuller affirmation of queer, trans, and non-binary people. Endless images of Jesus circulate in and around these movements – an altarpiece that shows Jesus as Black, for instance, or a cartoon that shows him playing with a sheep coloured to match the trans flag – and their use both reflects and helps to impel the movements from which they come, while also serving to generate and focus resistance to them.[1] In a situation like this it becomes unavoidably clear that the landscape of imaginings of Jesus is both vast and fractured, and that at times, as William Blake said, 'The Vision of Christ that thou dost see | Is my Visions Greatest Enemy'.[2]

I have found myself asking, therefore, what it means to keep on following Jesus as one becomes committed to liberative movements such as these, especially if, like me, the ways of imagining Jesus to which one has long been habituated are not the ones that one now encounters emerging from these movements as gifts and challenges. What does it mean to hold fast to Jesus when one's ways of imagining him go on being interrupted and questioned like this?

I ask this from the midst of particular practices of devotion and reflection. I worship in the Anglican parish church that sits a short walk from my house. Week by week, I attend services there in which, with others, I sing hymns to Jesus, pray in his name, hear scriptures about him read, and receive bread and wine presented to me as his body and blood. I am also an academic theologian who spends time exploring patterns of thinking that have helped to sustain and make sense of practices of devotion like mine. I work, in particular, within a tangled tradition of reflection that keeps on coming back to the idea that Jesus is (in words that we recite in my

[1] For the altarpiece, see Chapter 19, p. 363; for the cartoon, see 'Family fun LGBTQIA' by David Hayward (who draws under the name 'Naked Pastor'), https://nakedpastor.com/products/family-fun-lgbtqia-cartoon-print.

[2] William Blake, 'The Everlasting Gospel' (c. 1818); text available at https://blake.lib.asu.edu/html/everlasting_gospel.html.

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church nearly every week) 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God'.[3] For myself, therefore, I am asking quite specifically what it means to remain committed to the Jesus I know in and through this particular life of worship and the theological tradition that surrounds it – a tradition that I love – even when I have become aware that this is only one contingent form of response to Jesus amongst others, that it is veined with flaws, and that there are liberative movements within and around it that rightly call for its transformation.

A Note on Terminology

I am not using the word 'imagination' to refer to the conjuring up of fancies or the exercise of unconstrained creativity; I am not thinking about what is imaginary rather than real, or imaginative rather than pedestrian. I am instead talking about the way in which someone gathers up what they know about Jesus into a roughly coherent sense of who he is or what he is about. Such acts of construal or interpretation are unavoidably involved whenever Jesus is thought about, pictured or proclaimed.[4]

I use the word 'devotion' to cover the whole mess of practices and patterns of imagination involved in people's corporate and individual following of Jesus. There is a danger, I know, that it could suggest a piety detached from political engagement, or insulated from surrounding systems and structures, but I have tried to make clear in my usage that devotion is always entangled with those things.

[3] The text of the Nicene Creed that we use in my church is from the Archbishops' Council, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (Church House, 2000), available at https://bit.ly/4tn6Y2I.

[4] Cf. Chapter 2, pp. 28–30. For a similar account, see Judith Wolfe, *The Theological Imagination: Perception and Interpretation in Life, Art, and Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

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Finally, I use the terms 'liberation' and 'liberative movements' broadly, to include not only those strategies aimed at leading people out from under a situation of oppression, but also what Delores Williams called 'survival strategies . . . used to keep the community alive and hopeful', or what Ursula Le Guin called 'the art of making order where people live'.[5]

Making Sense of Devotion

There are three dimensions to the account that I offer in this book of devotion to Jesus. The first is a construal of that devotion's basic dynamic, the second a doctrinal account that serves to support, elaborate, and refine that construal, and the third a proposal about the forms of discernment needed to guide devotion so construed.

Trusting Jesus

The first dimension, my construal of the basic shape of devotion to Jesus, rests upon a conviction that, for me, lies somewhere close to the heart of Christian faith. It is the conviction that, for me and for my fellow Christians, the journey into love, mercy, and justice on which we understand all people to be called is, at the same time, a journey with and toward Jesus of Nazareth.

Another way of naming this conviction might be built upon the juxtaposition of two scriptural texts. Think, first, of Jesus' response to a lawyer's question about the greatest commandment. He said,

> 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first

[5] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis, 1993), p. 236; Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Bryn Mawr Commencement Address', in Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Place* (Grove, 1989), pp. 147–60 (p. 154).

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> commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22.37–40, par. Mark 12.29–31, Luke 10.27)

Think, second, of the words spoken from a cloud by the voice of God, high up on a mountain. That voice said of Jesus,

> This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him! (Matt. 17.5, par. Mark 9.7, Luke 9.35)

The conviction that I am trying to describe is simply that, when I hear the command to love alongside the command to listen to Jesus, I can hear them as the same command. To put it another way: the work of the Spirit is both to pour God's love into our hearts (Rom. 5.5) and to teach us about Jesus (John 15.26), and all of this is one work. My calling as a Christian, as I understand it, is to seek love in company with Jesus, and I know no calling deeper.

The setting for this conviction is prayer for the coming of God's kingdom. I write as someone trying to face up more fully to the brokenness of this world and to my part in that brokenness. I also write as someone seeking both for good ways of living in the world as it is and for ways of imagining, praying for, and working toward a better. And I write as someone trying to join in with others who are more compellingly engaged in this living, imagining, praying, and working. This is, in barest outline, what I mean when I speak of the journey toward love, mercy, and justice.

My conviction is that this journey need not take me away from Jesus, but will in fact be an ongoing discovery of his meaning. I trust that, on every step of this journey, I will be able to find that Jesus is accompanying, enabling, and leading me. And I trust that, if and when this journey leads me to any new place, I will find Jesus there ahead of me, even though it might be in a form I don't yet recognise.

I say this even though I know that all the patterns of life that I inhabit in relation to Jesus, and all the ways in which I currently understand love, mercy, and justice, are both contingent and

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compromised. I can well believe that the journey toward the kingdom will require me to leave behind much of this. My faith, however, is in Jesus, rather than in my present grasp upon him. I believe that, now and always, I am called to keep on coming back to him in worship and in penitence, trusting that by the work of his Spirit he will keep on undoing the failures of my imagination, and unveiling his true meaning.

This conviction is not, for me, a decision; it is not the conclusion to an argument. It is an intractable shape into which my feelings, imagination, and habits have been moulded over time, and to which they tend to spring back after perturbation. At times, it is little more than a habit so ingrained that I don't know how to live differently; at others, it is something I feel viscerally to be true and consciously affirm. I write from within this trust, seeking to understand it and to discover how it relates to all that I see around me. The construal that I offer in this book of devotion to Jesus is one shaped around this trust.

A High Christology

The second dimension of my account is provided by my conviction that high Christology can yield fruitful ways of thinking about the whole landscape of devotion to Jesus. By 'high Christology', I mean the varied and fractious conversation that helped produce the words of the Nicene Creed that I quoted earlier, and that has gone on ever since exploring and disputing the territory that they mark out. This tradition (a tradition that I refer to elsewhere in this book as the 'classical Christological tradition') runs through Chalcedon, and is shaped by attempts to make sense of Jesus as both human and divine – as one person in two natures, the incarnate Word.

This tradition, as I construe it, can yield an articulation of the unity between the call into the kingdom and the call to follow Jesus, and so a way of supporting and informing the kind of devotion to Jesus that I have been describing. It can also, however, help us make

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sense of the sheer variety of forms of devotion to Jesus, as well as of the failure and harm that are woven through all of them.

To put it very briefly: to speak of the God who is love is to speak of the one who calls people always and everywhere into that love, enabling, impelling, judging, and restoring their response; it is to recognise that the deepest truth about us all is that we are, together, hearers of that call. To speak of Jesus as God incarnate, as the classical Christological tradition does, is to say that his whole human life is God's communication of this call, and so the communication of God's own life of love to the world. It is to recognise that our vocation to love is at the same time our vocation to respond to the call that Jesus issued to the first disciples on the shores of Galilee: 'Follow me!' (Matt. 4.19, par. Mark 1.17; John 1.43).

My particular way of inhabiting this high Christological terrain is then organised around a single, central thought: that the life of God is strictly inexhaustible, such that there can never be an end to knowing God. But this means both that, if God is love, there can be no end to knowing love, and that, if Jesus is indeed God's way of sharing God's own life of love with the world, there can be no end to knowing Jesus. The endless journey into the knowledge of God will at one and the same time be an endless journey into the discovery of Jesus, and an endless journey into love.

We will never reach the end of the journey into love, and never achieve mastery of the knowledge that it yields. However deeply we might come to know it, we can expect to be taught it again and again by everyone we learn to love, and in every context in which we learn what loving looks like. We both know and do not yet know what love is, because love always beckons us on, always exceeds us, always stands over against the little of it that we have so far learnt to embody.

And our unending learning of love is also an unending discovery of Jesus – of his meaning for us, and of what following him involves – precisely because he is the making present in our midst of the inexhaustible love of God in the inexhaustibility of his

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humanity. We therefore both know and do not yet know who he is, and so we return again and again to the witnesses who speak to us of his life: to scripture, to its refractions in the Christian tradition, and to all those who have discovered and are discovering what it means to respond to these in their own times and places. We go on learning what sense to make of this witness in all the company that we keep and amidst all the ways in which we are learning to live.

If this high Christological vision is true, therefore, we should expect to find what we do in fact find: that Jesus is known by way of an endless profusion of ways of imagining. If we articulate this claim carefully, however, it will also help us make sense of the ways in which each of these forms of imagination is an improvisation upon the materials of scripture, each is an ingredient in an experiment in life and love together, and each is entangled with all that surrounds it, fraught with ambiguities and failures.

Ordinary Discernment

We should, then, expect an endless profusion of imaginings of Jesus, and such a profusion is proper to knowing him as the incarnation of God's Word. That does not mean, however, that we can avoid making judgements about which forms of imagination take us deeper into the knowledge of Jesus and into the life of God being shared with us in him, and which are drawing us away. The third dimension of this book's account has to do with the proper form and location of this discernment.

A cornerstone of my previous book, *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, was the conviction that 'Doctrinal theologians who can explain the most recherché technicalities of doctrine do not thereby know God better than do ordinary believers.'[6] I argued that 'For

[6] Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 4.

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Christians to grow in knowledge of God is for them to grow together in their imagination of the love of God for them, and in the wisdom that will enable them to live that love out in the midst of their lives.'[7] To put it another way: if you would know God, look to the saints before you look to the scholars. The present book is shaped by a similar conviction: that the primary form that the knowledge of Jesus takes is not the knowledge generated by doctrinal theologians, by historical critics, or by any other kind of expert, however useful such expertise might secondarily be. The primary form that the knowledge of Jesus takes is simply the knowledge of those who follow him and abide in him.

I am convinced that the deepest forms of discernment that Christians need as they seek this knowledge already lie to hand in the midst of ordinary devotion. The discernment that we need rests, first, upon devout attentiveness to the scriptural witness to Jesus. In particular, the touchstone for any journey across the landscape of Christian devotion to Jesus is a constant return to the gospels in the context of worship, read as stories that render for us their central character. There are many different ways in which such constant return can shape a whole corporate practice of devotion, and I have tried to write in such a way as to be open to that variety. Nevertheless, some such devout attentiveness is the ground on which we can say that a pattern of life is recognisable as a form of devotion specifically to Jesus.

The presence of such devout reading does not, however, guarantee true knowledge of him. There are patterns of devotion patently shaped by such attentiveness that I nevertheless have to regard as betrayals of him and rejections of the kingdom that he proclaimed and embodied. And however much I wish I could claim that such betrayals are always generated by failures in reading (because I cannot see how their proponents can take so differently the same

[7] Higton, *Life*, p. 7.

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texts that I love) I know that, in practice, such claims are difficult to make stick. Given what I believe, however, about Jesus being God's way of sharing God's life with the world, I see a second ground for the discernment that we need. We should be looking for the forms of devotion to Jesus that go deepest into the inexhaustible life of God being shared with us in him. And the place to look for such forms is where love, justice, and mercy are being imagined, pursued, and inhabited, and where lovelessness, exclusion, and injustice are being overcome.

It is making this argument that will ultimately allow me to explain why I believe that, in my context, the movements for racial justice in the church, and for the fuller inclusion and affirmation there of trans, non-binary, and queer people, are two key sites (alongside many others) in which Jesus is making himself known by his Spirit. They are not simply places where a dispensable gloss can be added to a knowledge of Jesus already secure without them, but sites where Jesus is being revealed in transformative and life-giving ways. And this is just how we should expect our knowledge of Jesus to grow.

Another Note on Terminology

Because I speak in this book both from and to a particular devotional context, I have a stake in the recognisability within that context of what I say. That creates some interesting tensions concerning vocabulary.

I have, for instance, avoided masculine pronouns for God, except in quoted material, despite the fact that their use is rife in my devotional context. I don't think this choice will make my speech unrecognisable in that context, and I can imagine changes taking place here that might enable the church of which I am a part to move in this direction. I have, however, continued to use 'Father' and 'Son' pervasively. Those names are used constantly in liturgy and hymnody, and in the translations of the Scriptures that we read, and I don't think there is any prospect of that changing soon (and

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I am in any case unsure how I feel about such change). At the risk of adding to the inertia that holds it in place, I want to know (and to help others in my context know) how to live with our present language as best we can, even though that will inevitably mean fighting – and sometimes losing – against some of the worst connotations of the words we use.

I have also continued regularly to use the word 'kingdom'.[8] Again, that is partly because it is so deeply embedded in my context, not least in the version of the Lord's Prayer that we say every week in my church. My decision here, though, is bolstered by my suspicion (which may just be wishful thinking) that the word doesn't automatically or strongly bring with it, in my context, the connotations of mastery and imperious power that in other contexts it might. Despite living, for now, in a monarchy, and in a country that for that reason has 'kingdom' in its title, the word 'kingdom' itself does not in my experience turn up much in discussions of that political system, by either its fans or its critics. My hope has been that the word's more harmful connotations might prove less durable than we fear, and that it might not resist being given its own gospel-driven content, oriented to love, justice, and mercy.

Writing Doctrinal Theology

I am neither a historian nor an ethnographer, and this book is not primarily an attempt to describe the patchwork landscape of devotion to Jesus in rich circumstantial detail. I borrow from others' descriptions, especially in Part I, but my own focus is on a different kind of account – a theological and specifically a doctrinal one.

[8] For an argument against the continued use of 'kingdom', see Ada María Isasi-Díaz, 'Kin-Dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal', in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. by Benjamin Valentin (Orbis, 2010), pp. 171–89.

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Despite all that I said about the ordinary nature of the discernment required from those navigating the landscape of devotion, I do believe that a doctrinal account can play a useful role. That role is, however, necessarily a secondary one. As I have written before, 'Doctrinal theology does not and cannot capture the whole of belief, or the whole of the lives that surround belief. Even when it is done well, it articulates only a part of what is going on; it deals in diagrams or cartoons, while belief is an impressionist painting.'[9]

I am, in this book, offering reflections upon a life of devotion and discernment that precedes and exceeds those reflections, and I do so only *for the sake of* that life. It is the life that matters in the end, not the reflections.

My aim is to develop for myself, and to offer to the people around me, one way of imagining what it is that we are already involved in as we follow Jesus in the midst of all the various forms that devotion to him takes. I do not suppose that those already doing good work navigating the landscape of devotion are waiting upon such a doctrinal account, but I see myself as providing one kind of accompaniment, one kind of intellectual allyship to their ongoing endeavours. Here, I say, is how that already existing work looks to me. Here is how I, standing where I happen to stand, and drawing on the traditions that I happen to inhabit, have learnt to imagine the whole field of such sense-making and discernment. I write to ask whether this particular construal might be recognisable to others, might help shape their imaginations in ways that support and impel their work, and might help them name and avoid patterns of thought that would hold them back. But I also write so that, as my words enter the ongoing conversation about Jesus, I might discover how my doctrinal imagination is still keeping me from a deeper knowledge of Jesus and a deeper discovery of the love to which he calls me. This is not an exercise, then, in laying

[9] Higton, *Life*, p. 232.

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down the doctrinal law, but in setting out a provisional doctrinal possibility.

This task remains an odd one, however, because the 'way of imagining what it is that we are already involved in' that I offer inevitably looks like an *overview* – a view from above. I will be making claims about how Christian devotion relates to the eternal purposes of the Creator of all things, and to our ultimate destiny as creatures. It is hard to say those things without sounding like one is looking down from a stratospherically high position, master of all one surveys.

More than that, there is something askew about the classical Christological tradition specifically. It is not just that its origins are inseparable from Christianity's poisoned love affair with Roman imperial power, nor that it has all too often underwritten images of Jesus' universal rule that have in turn enabled horrific patterns of Christian violence. It is also that the keepers of the doctrinal tradition that flows from Nicaea and Chalcedon, including its modern academic interpreters, have all too often been addicted to speaking for and speaking over others: to so insisting upon the story of Jesus as they tell it that little space remains for anyone else to tell his story differently. That is one of the diseases rightly diagnosed by many feminist, Black, liberation, postcolonial, and queer theologians who have been starkly critical of this tradition. To turn to it now to find a framework for describing the whole globally diverse landscape of devotion to Jesus, including the Jesuses of all those liberative movements themselves, could sound like nothing more than a not very subtly renewed imperialism.

These dangers are real. I have, however, tried to avoid them in two interlinked ways. The first is a matter of method. I have tried to write in such a way as to acknowledge the specific location from which I speak, to show some of the ways in which that location has shaped my voice, and to acknowledge that this location is simply one amongst many others. I do not think that simply naming this location in my introduction is, by itself, a particularly effective way

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of doing this, and it is certainly not much of a protection against imperialism, but it is a place to start. It is worth knowing, then, that I am a middle-class White man, cisgender and heterosexual, who grew up in England, mostly in Essex. I have been a lifelong participant in the Church of England, though I have moved from very 'low-church' charismatic evangelicalism in a suburban context, through a big city-centre church in a university town, to a succession of smaller, mostly village churches that many English Anglicans would probably describe as 'middle of the road'. I have worked in a trio of English universities (Cambridge, Exeter, and now Durham) and I describe myself as a doctrinal theologian because I work with the kind of Christian teachings about God that are recognised as authoritative within my own and various other churches. I have tended to focus specifically on modern interpretations of these teachings, concentrating at first on those that turn up in academic and church contexts in the UK and North America, mostly amongst middle-class White people like me. Over the past two decades, however, I have become involved in work that explores the limitations of those interpretations and the patterns of life that they support – joining in first with inter-faith conversations, then with debates about gender and sexuality, and then with discussions of racial justice.

I have approached the writing of this book, therefore, as someone standing at one particular confluence in the circulation of images of Jesus. The Jesuses that I grew up with (images circulating in charismatic evangelical Anglican contexts in the south of England) have been overlain by the Jesuses that became central in my academic work (most notably those circulating in English-language discussions of Nicene and Chalcedonian Christology) and interrupted by the Jesuses circulating within Black, liberation, postcolonial, feminist, and queer theologies, and in the wider movements that those theologies serve. I write as someone involved in, committed to, and sometimes bewildered by this unfinished encounter, fascinated by its dynamics, and eager to discover where it might lead. This book

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is, for me, an attempt to make sense of my own faith and experience as I stand at this confluence.

As I say, however, I have not thought it enough simply to name my location at the start of the book and then move on. I have instead tried to illuminate some of the specific ways in which the choices I have made in writing, the emphases that have seemed to me to make sense, and the things that I have taken for granted, all have roots in the particular contexts that have shaped me. I have done this in part by pointing out connections as they arise in the midst of my argument, but also – because I want to help readers spot connections that might not be so visible to me – by including a series of autobiographical sketches. This is an experiment on my part, but I hope that it will make it easier for readers whose experience differs from mine to ask whether and how those differences could lead to them thinking Christology differently. Mine is only one view of this contested landscape of devotion, and I doubt that it will look the same from anywhere else.

The second way in which I have tried to avoid my discipline's besetting imperialist temptations has to do more directly with the substance of my argument, and can be named more briefly. What I think I have found, with others' help, in the classical Christological tradition – a storyline that I have found myself assembling from its materials, when I reach for them from the particular place where I stand – is an account of the impossibility of mastering Jesus. I have found in this tradition, as I have said, an insistence that Jesus is inherently inexhaustible, and so an account that denies that any tradition or discipline can possess an image of him capable of framing all others. It is an account, in other words, that itself denies that there is anyone who has the right to speak for, and to speak over, all the voices that speak of Jesus differently. It is an account that expects to be supplemented and even interrupted, and that I will be betraying if I end up writing in a voice that claims mastery.

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I have not, however, taken a third route, which might have seemed necessary to avoid my discipline's colonial bent. I have not made any attempt to avoid speaking about the whole landscape around which images of Jesus circulate. I have not held back from making claims about Jesus' relation to all of creation and all of human history, or claims about his relation to the deepest vocation of all human beings. I have not, in other words, done anything to avoid claims of global or even cosmic scope; I have, if anything, leaned into them. I remain convinced that to know Jesus truly is to know him as coming from and making known the God who is the beginning and end of all things – and if that is true, then he has something to do with our discovery of the deepest and widest context for all of our lives, and for the life of all creation. I have not held back from making such claims, however, precisely because I believe that it is this God who ultimately stands against all the attempts at mastery that I find in myself and in my own and other traditions; it is God who speaks out against such mastery through the calls and cries of those whom it excludes or marginalises; and it is God who invites all people into a life beyond mastery.

There is, however, a shape that I have found emerging repeatedly across the pages that follow: an oscillation between inflationary and deflationary movements. There are times – whole chapters! – when I reach for grand and confident claims about the eternal Word of God. I have made those claims with relish, gleefully flinging paint onto the broadest of backdrops. Those discussions repeatedly lead me, however, to deflationary conclusions: to the idea that these grand claims do no more and no less than provide a backdrop to surround and support the simple impulse to keep on reading the gospels, to keep on praying and singing to Jesus, to keep on talking to others about him, to keep on looking out for ways of pursuing justice in his company, and to keep on repenting of my failures as I do so. My grand, inflationary claims turn out to be no less than, but also little more than, a support for such ordinary injunctions. I do not think I have to choose between these two movements, the

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inflationary and the deflationary; I believe that they cohere, and that they support one another. If I did somehow have to choose, however, there would be no real contest for me. I would choose the ordinary.

Preview

Since this book explores both God's incarnation in the body of Jesus, and our embodied engagement with him, it begins with a preliminary chapter on bodies. I suggest that embodied life necessarily involves negotiation with the affordances and resistances both of our own materiality and of all that surrounds us. I suggest that those negotiations always involve our imaginations, which provide our sense of the forms of engagement that might be possible. I suggest that knowing another living being is always, in its fullest sense, a matter of knowing how you might live well with them, or knowing how you might arrange a habitable life together in the light of the affordances and resistances that you each offer and that you encounter together in the world. Finally, I suggest that there is always more to be known of any body, and that each body has a depth to it that comes into view only over the whole endless sequence of forms of life that are woven around it. Bodies are, inherently, inexhaustible.

Part I of the book turns to the description of Christian devotion, and offers three case studies. I look at devotion to the Santo Niño in the Philippines, at the life of two Vineyard churches in the United States, and at my own church in a village just outside Durham, in the United Kingdom. I don't yet focus on the kinds of liberative movement that I have mentioned in this introduction; my purpose at this stage is rather to point to the diversity, density, and messiness of devotion to Jesus more generally. Rather than delving into individual experience, I look primarily at the Jesuses that circulate between people in these contexts. In each of them, Christian bodies

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are arranged around an imagined body of Jesus, and those imagined bodies and the ways of life that respond to them are always in the process of being assembled, always hybrids, and always entangled with all that surrounds them. Each such pattern of life and imagination is built from materials that have been handed on, adapted, and arranged into new configurations. Each is a way of reading scripture, each an experiment in love – and each a mixture of the life-giving and the death-dealing.

In Part II, I turn to doctrinal theology. I insist that my account is necessarily provisional, a contestable and partial balancing act worked up in one particular context, making use of materials that I happen to have inherited and that lie to hand for me in my context – and that it *must* be so provisional, given both the inexhaustibility of its object and the nature of embodied knowledge. And I argue that it must, if it is to do justice to its object, be oriented toward love and toward liberation.

I explain in Chapter 10 that my doctrinal account, however grand its scope, is rooted in the particular forms of devotion that I know, and that it makes sense to begin with the gospels as they are read in my own context; I provide a sketch of Jesus' identity as it appears in that context. In Chapters 11–14, I then set out a detailed doctrinal backdrop for and commentary upon this portrait of Jesus. Chapter 11 provides a theology of the eternal Word and of the Word's role in creation, Chapter 12 explores the claim that the Word took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, and Chapter 13 the claim that the Spirit draws creatures into the divine life made present in the world in Jesus. The central claims in those three chapters are that Jesus is the means by which God communicates God's own inexhaustible life of love and justice to the world; that this communication is the very purpose for which the world was made; that the Jesus in whom this life is communicated is himself inexhaustible, such that no one form of devotion or imagination can possess him; and that the Spirit's work in leading people into knowledge of him must therefore take the form of an endless and endlessly surprising journey.

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If Jesus is aptly described by the kind of doctrinal account I give, it will make sense to find devotion to him circulating around the highly various bodies that people have imagined for him, and to find each of those imaginings to be entangled with all that surrounds it, for good and ill. It will make sense that each of these forms of devotion should be, in its own way, a pattern of reading scripture, and that each should be an imperfect experiment in the love to which Jesus calls us. It will make sense that it should be through the whole varied and broken landscape of such devotion that the Spirit makes Jesus known, and that in doing this the Spirit should work with all the stuff of our embodied existence. And it will make sense for me to trust that my own devotion, and that of many others, can go on being informed, challenged, and called to repentance by those liberative movements in which the Spirit is most deeply at work establishing God's love and justice, both within and beyond the church.

The doctrinal theology set out in this second part of the book works on a grand scale, measured from creation to eschaton and rooted in the deep purposes of God; it leads up to an affirmation that it does indeed make sense to say that Jesus is himself God in the flesh. I will argue, however, that without doing any violence to its claims it can be summarised in two much more low-flying statements. First, the doctrine of the incarnation exists to repeat in its own way what God the Father has already done in the story of Jesus' transfiguration: to point to this one human being as God's beloved Son, and say, 'Listen to him!' Second, the doctrine is there to call us to the trust that I mentioned earlier: the trust that seeking after love and seeking after Jesus will not finally come apart. This is the trust that one can, as one pursues the kingdom of God, remain committed to devotion to Jesus, expecting to go on discovering in his company the love that is the keystone of the kingdom.

In Part III, I look again at this expectation that Christians will discover love in Jesus' company, and focus on what this might mean for the reading of scripture. I begin, in Chapter 16, with the

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endlessly various ways in which, according to scripture's own testimony, Christians are being taught by the Spirit to read for God's sake, learning to glimpse in scripture the love, justice, and mercy toward which they are being called. In Chapter 17, I turn to the ways in which this Spirit-led journey into love and justice can have at its heart a continual re-reading of the gospel witness to Jesus of Nazareth, and an ongoing discovery of his identity. It is in that chapter that, in order to understand what it means for one's reading of Jesus and one's reading for the sake of the kingdom to cohere, I explore the possibility that they might come apart. I therefore focus on the ambiguities, difficulties, and challenges that mark the gospels, especially those that threaten to undermine the pursuit of love. I finish by pointing to the existence of communities at the sharp end of the pursuit of God's justice who find in the stories of Jesus a renewable resource rather than an inheritance that needs to be explained away – people who go on finding creative ways of appropriating the gospels, ways that enable and resource the liberative work into which the Spirit has drawn them. My trust that reading toward Jesus and reading toward the kingdom will not come apart is bolstered by the life and work of such communities.

In Part IV of the book I turn to the two specific liberative movements that I have had in mind all along: the movements for racial justice in the church and for the inclusion and affirmation there of trans, non-binary, and queer people. These chapters are not, for me, a dispensable illustration or application of the theology developed in earlier chapters. I have written the whole book with them in mind, as an attempt to make sense of the kind of re-imagining of Jesus that I find taking place in them. These chapters are, therefore, the place where the doctrinal abstractions of Part II and the generalised hermeneutical claims of Part III begin to touch back down, and in which the need for those abstractions and generalised claims to go on being developed and rethought becomes clear.

In Chapter 19, which focuses on race, I argue that Jesus' consubstantiality with humanity, established in the incarnation, cannot be

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thought of as a bland universality. It is a relationship in which the poor, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness come first. It makes sense for Christians in contexts like mine, when looking amidst the many forms of devotion to Jesus that surround us, and seeking to make discernments about what the Spirit might be teaching us about him, to turn first to those with whom Jesus first shared his life. The landscape of forms of Christian devotion is, in other words, not level, but is tilted toward justice, and those places where the love of God most clearly stands against all that denies and betrays this justice are the heartlands of the imagining of Jesus. It would be wise for those of us not already caught up in such movements of the Spirit to turn first in their direction when we seek to know Jesus more truly.

In Chapter 20, which focuses on gender identity, I return to the idea that in Christian devotion the Spirit gathers people in all the complexity and richness of their embodied existence around the imagined body of Jesus. I ask again what it means to negotiate such bodily life in relation to Jesus in the light of all the affordances and resistances provided by our bodies and by his. The movement for trans, nonbinary, and queer liberation provides an opportunity to see how, in this ongoing and unfinishable negotiation, we are all discovering the possible ways of living in, with, and as our bodies, at every level from our chromosomes to the patterns of our feelings and our capacities for certain kinds of experience. This is a negotiation that involves each of us in the discovery and articulation of our own gender identity, and in the invention of forms of community life that will do justice to what we are discovering. I say in Part I that, in each form of Christian devotion, the bodies of believers are arranged around imagined bodies of Jesus. I finish by arguing that it makes sense to look, amidst all the devotional pathways open to us, for those that will allow us to do most justice to the complexity, the unfinishedness, and the unruly potential given in our embodiment by the God of the incarnation.

In the conclusion, I summarise the guidance that my whole account yields for navigating the landscape of devotion to Jesus.

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Despite the length of the book and the scale of some of its claims, that yield is simple enough. Look for those forms of devotion in which the gospels, read in the context of worship, are together taken to provide an apt rendering of Jesus, and in which the whole story that they tell is taken to be the word of life spoken to us by God. And look to the forms of devotion to Jesus that emerge where one sees the love, justice, and mercy of God being pursued and lived out. That is where one can expect to find the Spirit most powerfully at work, drawing people into the knowledge of Jesus and of the love shared with the world in him – the love that is God's own inexhaustible life.

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