

Book review: A Jesus Way Forward: Contemplative Discovery Through Story, Scripture, and Spiritual Practice.¹

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How can a more contemplative scripture reading contribute to gathering and growing a diverse neighbourly group embodying a Christlike nature that becomes a Spirit-led restorative community enhancing local peace and justice and weaving hope into the commons? This question is at the heart of this book in which Marisa Lapish delves into the Way of life, modelled by Jesus, “a marginalized Jew – a Word made flesh – among marginalized people with disenfranchised disciples as his family”. With Jesus at the centre, the people of the Way received an entire new identity, a new morality and structure of society. Following the Spirit to new places and peoples, confronting new spiritual dilemmas, the trajectory of hospitality and radical inclusivity continued, rooted in spiritual practices. “The Jesus Way”, writes Lapish, “was a beloved community of practice”. (Though we should not forget its incompleteness as various New Testament letters specifically demonstrate).

In a fractured post-pandemic modern world, the author retraces the steps of the Christ-like way of life during the historic, early century pandemics when the followers of the Way sacrificially cared for the sick, provided a sense of meaning amidst suffering in the light of eternity, offered comfort and drew people into their circle of fellowship, leading to their salvation. The church fathers’ reading and prayerfully meditating on the scriptures and applying these to their times reminds us that socially restoring people is integral to the Christian faith. After all, Christ is identified with the marginalised.

And so, each generation needs to confront the dilemmas and fractures of its era and rediscover spiritual reflective and formative ways to embody the contrasting Way in its time. Lapish advocates that the value of ancient spiritual practices – including those from the East and South - must be recovered for the Jesus Way of the future. The discussion of various ways of contemplative reading of the scriptures, prayer, hospitality, and inclusivity is reflective of her comprehensive research. Her vignettes that describe the conversations in community practice bring the material further alive. Listening to and honouring diverse people changes everyone and hones the communal

¹ Marisa J. Lapish. *A Jesus Way Forward: Contemplative Discovery Through Story, Scripture, and Spiritual Practice*. (Abbotsford: St Macrina Press, 2023).

lens. Such deeper understanding forges a better neighbourly way ahead in which the community develops appropriate action concerning peace, justice and mercy.

“Cultural moments in history have a scattering effect on the Jesus Way”, writes Lapish. The scattering effect is poignantly described in Elaine Heath’s *God Unbound*: “...it looks like a spiritual dandelion explosion as far as the eye can see. God’s new thing is networked, exponential, Spirit-breathed, decentralized, a vast planting of small communities of faith...”² Lapish thus reimagines the Jesus Way of the future. While the church in the West faces a dark night of the soul, the author reminds us that it can be the ideal time for a deeper longing for God, liberating love, and the initiation of meeting places with those in the neighbourhood who also have existential questions. As Jesus has already moved into the neighbourhood, we will once again find Him there. To listen to the stories of those who we live alongside, to become a good friend of Him and of the people He loves, will give space to ‘God moments’ in which all are changed. The inherent value, experience, gift and story of each person are central in the emergence of local forums where different people (groups) collaborate to gain a better understanding of dynamics that prevent people to thrive. Such friendships transform a community that creates something new amidst the social processes that lead to hopelessness and marginalisation, as economic justice is rooted in relationship, expanding the spaces where people can flourish.

A Jesus Way Forward is anchored in the centrality of Christ and a rich historic heritage. Rooted in invaluable spiritual practices, it envisages a revitalising movement of God as His people venture forward with inquisitiveness concerning the experience, wisdom and cries of those who live alongside them. In line with the vision of God and following His Son who faithfully and sacrificially engaged in a costly engagement, it inspires through the gift of the Spirit to live faithfully in and for our neighbourhoods.

² E.A. Heath, *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church*, Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2016: p.98.