

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The problem with writing a book about ordinariness is that it risks being seen as thoroughly boring. The theme doesn't suggest excitement in any shape or form. Ordinariness is not exhilarating; it does not imply stimulation or interest. Surely ordinariness is something to be shunned in favour of things that are special, newer, bigger and better? The difficulty with this, however, is that while occasionally we can indulge in special, exciting, bigger and better events, a large part of our life *is* ordinary. It doesn't really matter how glamorous (or not) your life is, you still need to do ordinary things like travelling to work, brushing your teeth or doing the weekly shop. We all have long periods of ordinariness and in these periods is a richness, a depth of potential experience which we need to encounter. This book seeks to take the time to savour ordinariness and to discern a little more what a spirituality of ordinariness might look like. It seeks to encounter again not only the importance of ordinariness but the inspiration that we can gain from a deeper and more sustained reflection on the everyday.

This book falls into what is slowly becoming a series. The series began with a book on Advent, *The Meaning is in the Waiting: The Spirit of Advent*, which I was asked to write. I enjoyed it so much that I begged my publisher to

let me write another based around my favourite season of Easter, *This Risen Existence: The Spirit of Easter*. Then, having done two, the series took on a life of its own in my head and almost before I was conscious of it, I asked whether I could tack on something on the longest season of the church's year, known as Ordinary Time.¹

Books such as these are not designed to tell you everything you need to know about Advent, Easter or Ordinary Time – there are plenty of other books that do that much better than this one could. Nor are they designed to go through expounding the lectionary readings for people preparing to preach; again Christian bookshops are full of such volumes. Instead, in this book, as much as in the Advent and Easter books, I am trying to capture an essence, to communicate a feeling about a season which may help us to encounter that season more intentionally and with a clearer insight into what we might learn about God and ourselves during that season.

Of course Ordinary Time is probably the soggiest season of all. Very few if any people enter Ordinary Time with any intention other than allowing it to slide by until the Kingdom season and Advent hove into view once more. Few people are even conscious that they are in Ordinary Time when they are. Nevertheless it is a good time of the year to stop and reflect about the importance of ordinariness. I remain passionately convinced that we need to look again at a spirituality of ordinariness because without a proper understanding of the importance of ordinariness, our lives become an impoverished waiting room, as we loiter between one big event and another.

It doesn't matter at all whether you are reading this book in Ordinary Time or not; it doesn't even matter if you have never even heard of Ordinary Time. What is important is the celebration of the ordinary in all its

¹ For a fuller description of what Ordinary Time is see pages 6–7.

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forms: in the lives of ordinary people; in a God who defies our best attempts to put him in a gilded palace; in a kingdom that is best likened to seeds, yeast and fishing nets, and in everyday decisions which, lived out with God, have extraordinary consequences. I have no desire whatsoever to strip out of our lives a sense of awe and wonder, merely to remind us all that majesty can be found in the everyday just as much as in the splendour of regal palaces, and that extraordinariness can just as easily be observed in ordinary as in special things.

I have chosen in this book to look at the theme of ordinariness through the lens of thirty-three biblical passages which all, in some way or another, touch on the theme of ordinariness. There is no great mystical significance to the number thirty-three, it is simply the number of weeks in Ordinary Time in most years. I do not for a moment expect that anyone will read one reflection a week throughout the periods of Ordinary Time but they are here to be dipped in and out of as suits your own pattern.

As in the other two books in this series (Advent and Easter), for the most part I deal with texts in their final form. Although, as an avid student of the Bible myself, I am fascinated by questions of how the biblical books reached their final form, I am all too aware that this interest is, to put it mildly, not shared by everyone. So, as far as possible, I have left overtly critical questions aside, only bringing them in as and when they are particularly important for understanding a specific text. Each chapter of the book is split into a number of sections. In most chapters there are six sections but since six does not go into thirty-three the final chapter has only three. Each section is headed by the specific passage that I will be reflecting on but also with the suggestion for further reading if, like me, you like to read a passage in context. Sometimes there is no easy wider context to suggest, and

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in those cases I haven't suggested any, but for the most part there are longer bits of reading to do for those who would like to.

Also, as in the other volumes in this series, I have chosen an R. S. Thomas poem as an additional lens through which to view the essence of ordinariness. The poem 'The Bright Field' (which you will find at the start of the Introduction below) introduces something which is for me a vital strand to the whole question of ordinariness. This is the need for us to be people who can turn aside in order to encounter God. Indeed, it is so important that Chapter 1 focuses around this whole question, before we turn outwards to questions of the unsung heroes of the Bible, the ordinariness of God and his kingdom, living extraordinary ordinary lives and, finally, catching glimpses of God's glory in our everyday lives.