

Preface

EACH CHAPTER OF THIS book contains a passage from one of the gospels (and sometimes some of the other readings for the day), a sermon I have given on the passage, and a set of questions for reflection. The idea, as the title suggests, is to invite the reader to engage in his or her version of the conversation that the gospels began two thousand years ago and have kept going ever since. My own version of this conversation is reflected in the sermons themselves, and in the questions I ask. The reader's engagement can be private—just between the reader and the text—or it can take place with others, as in a study group or seminar. In either event, the premise on which the book operates is that the gospels acquire their life and meaning in the conversational process by which we connect with them.

This means that we are responsible for our part in these conversations, for the questions we raise and the responses we offer. We can, of course, trivialize the gospels, say by converting them into sentimental fictions, by trying to turn them to our own advantage, or by treating them as the occasion for the kind of talk we see in a chat room or bull session.

Or we can—well, do what, exactly? What is a good kind of conversation to have about the gospels? That is a central question of this book, and what follows is my own best effort to respond to it. I hope you will engage with that question too, answering it in your own way, perhaps in a way that is critical of what I say and do. My hope is that these gospel texts and sermons and questions will be starting points for further thought and discussion, not in any way conclusive. We are all in this together.

These sermons are not scholarly in kind, or meant to defend a theological theory or to assert a position they want the reader to accept. They represent my own engagement with the gospel texts and my own efforts

to understand the life to which they call us. They are not an argument for belief, but at best a partial demonstration of what for one person belief has made possible.