

Christianity: boring, untrue and irrelevant? Christ Church @ The Pilgrim

I guess we've all been there. Something barely resembling a tune starts from the piano or the organ. And then the choir pipes up – either the only 20 people in the school who were willing to be in it, regardless of ability, or the middle aged ladies in full robes. Either way it usually sounds pretty dreadful.

And what do they sing? Well probably something like: *And did those feet in ancient times, Walk upon England's mountains green?*

And you sit there and think: Jesus' feet. Walking in England. No of course they didn't. What a load of nonsense. And then there are the preachers. Dreary sermons full of incomprehensible theology or of irritating moralising. Well if that's something like your experience of what is often described as "organised religion" then you have my sympathy.

And it's likely, I think, that that is something like your experience because, that's how most people experience school assemblies or church services. And if you've come here tonight hoping for an impassioned defence of churches and their leaders then I fear you are destined to be disappointed.

Because it seems to me that much, in fact, most of what passes for Christianity is desperately, and utterly boring and irrelevant. And it seems to me also that many of those who operate under the banner of Christianity have very, very little to say to the pressing issues that face us as individuals and as a society.

And what little they do say is often very poorly presented in a way that seems almost calculated to engage the interest of as few people as possible.

But before you all run to the buffet table and say "ah well, case proven" I think we need to reflect a little bit further.

Because there are really two ways in which you could think about our title for this evening. One is to take it as something like *Religion: boring, untrue and irrelevant?* And if that's what you think then I'm absolutely with you. 100%. Now that's not to say that the religions of the world haven't produced great art, impressive architecture, social systems that bind people together effectively and all sorts of other things. But it is to say that ultimately the religious systems of the world

are devoid of any true and helpful connection with the real lives that we live.

But I also think it would be a mistake to think that we can substitute the word "religion" for the word "Christianity" in the title of my talk. Because if anything Christianity is an "anti-religion".

What do I mean by that? Well generally when I meet people and introduce myself as some who is the minister or a church their response is something like: "Ah, I'm not religious myself." It's almost as if they are apologising for not going to lots of church services or something. As if they sense that my job is to get people to pull their socks up and bit and try just slightly harder to be acceptable to God.

So they're often quite taken aback when I reply: "Oh no I hate religion." What I mean when I say that is that the religions of the world are about what we can do to make us acceptable to God, or to bring us closer to God.

But the message of Christianity is precisely that there is nothing **we** can do to make us right with God. The message of Christianity is that we are entirely dependent on God to do what needs to be done so that we might know him.

It is a huge mistake to think of Christianity as a word that means the same as religion. If you wanted another, more interesting way of understanding our question this evening you could put it something like this: *Jesus: boring, untrue and irrelevant?*

Now **that's** a question. Because, rightly understood, Christianity is not about religion or meetings or services. It is about following Jesus Christ. And it is the great tragedy of much of what passes for Christianity in our culture that it is **not** focussed on who Jesus is, what he said and did and it's implications for us today. Because if it was it would be a lot more interesting!

Sure the Jesus of RE lessons you may not find exactly inspirational. But that's because the Jesus of RE lessons is usually nothing like the Jesus of the Bible.

The real Jesus, the Jesus who was a person who walked around on the earth, who had friendships and meals and conversations and discussions is, without a shadow of a doubt,

one of the most fascinating people who ever lived. A brilliant storyteller, a captivating public speaker, a worker of astonishing miracles and a teacher of blazing clarity. That is the Jesus of the Bible. He is not boring. And his book, the Bible, is not boring. But is it true? And is it relevant?

Well to help us think about that turn with me to John 10. I guess that many of us are familiar with the idea of Jesus as "the good shepherd." But often our image of Jesus as "the good shepherd" owes rather more to children's Bibles with a rather effeminate Jesus holding a little cuddly, fluffy lamb in his arms (everybody go aaaahhhh) than to what the people of Jesus' time would have understood by a shepherd.

In 1st century Palestine sheep roamed freely around the countryside and a shepherd went with them. At night the sheep would be penned up in a walled enclosure with several shepherds sharing a pen and taking turns to keep watch. In the morning each shepherd would get his sheep by opening the gate and calling to the sheep until his own sheep came out of the pen leaving the others behind.

So Jesus sets up a contrast between a shepherd and a thief (v1-2). The thief can't come to the gate because the sheep won't recognise the voice of a stranger. In fact, Jesus says, they'll run away from a thief. But the shepherd can call to the sheep, they'll recognise his voice and follow him. Everything depends on whether they recognise the voice or not.

According to v6, Jesus used this figure of speech, this metaphor, but the religious leaders who were listening, did not understand what he was telling them. Jesus isn't just telling a nice story here. He is actually explaining what is happening before their very eyes. The religious leaders don't understand what Jesus is talking about. Because they don't recognise Jesus' voice.

Why don't they recognise his voice? Because they're not his sheep. **The very people, the religious people, that you would expect to recognise Jesus turn out not to be his sheep at all.**

One of the astonishing things in the Bible is that the people who most often fail to recognise God when he shows up amongst them are the religious people. What matters is not whether we have "got religion." What matters is that we hear Jesus' voice and follow him.

OK. Fair enough. So what exactly is it that Jesus is claiming to be able to offer us? Well he makes it clear in v10. *My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.* So what's that then?

Well it's not simply better quality of life for 3 score years and 10 and then the end. You can see that in the very next chapter where Jesus raises someone from the dead – this life that he offers is about eternity. But neither is what Jesus offers merely life like we experience at the moment only stretched to eternity - Jesus is not just offering us more time to fill.

What Jesus offers is life at its scarcely imagined best. Eternity, yes, but not an eternity of booze, hangovers, sex, drugs, lectures, exams, jobs, divorce, tears, pain, traffic jams and "I'm a celebrity get me out of here." What Jesus offers, the good life, is an eternity in the shelter and security of being one of Jesus' sheep, one of his people.

Most of it, 99% of the blessing of the Christian life, is future. But this is not just pie in the sky. It does start now.

And I hope you recognise that when you look at authentic Christian lives, at the lives of people who follow Jesus you see that. There is, I hope you have seen if you know any Christians, a quality about a committed Christian life that other people simply don't have. There is a sense of security, protection and purpose. Christians are willing to confront the realities of life and death because of the security found in Jesus. Jesus offers life – life to the full.

I hope you can see that that begins to answer the question of whether Jesus is relevant!

Because if this is what Jesus offers it must be of infinite relevance to every single human being on the face of the planet. Life to the full, life in relationship with the God who made us, beginning now and lasting forever is about as relevant as you can get, isn't it?

And because Jesus is about life Biblical Christianity has much to say that is relevant in every area of life. About love and money and time and forgiveness and the environment and sex and art and work and science and economics and medical ethics and about all sorts of other things.

Jesus is profoundly relevant today. Because he came to bring life.

Well that's fair enough. But is it true? I guess some people here this evening may think that all that sounds great.

But you've experienced enough events and people in your life already who promised more than they were able to deliver.

How do you know Jesus isn't just another one of those? How do we know Jesus can provide eternal security for his sheep? How, in short, do we know that it's true?

Well to present a complete and comprehensive of the evidence for the truth of the Christian message would take a lot longer than I've got now! But Jesus here points us to the right place to look. How do we know what kind of a shepherd Jesus is?

V11 tells us: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

Now of course generally speaking a shepherd would not deliberately die in the course of his duty. You see the death of the shepherd doesn't make any sense unless the sheep are in danger. But that is exactly the situation Jesus envisages. Jesus, the good shepherd lays down his life because the sheep are in danger.

We are in danger. God will judge the world. And as a morally pure, a holy God he cannot tolerate wrongdoing and sin, mine or yours. We are in danger of being destroyed because we have all turned our backs on God.

But Jesus' death averts that danger. He took the punishment that we deserved for our wrongdoing and sin and died in our place. Jesus' death was not a tragic accident. He lays down his life quite deliberately, so that we can live (v18).

Jesus is in a position to make an amazing offer. He died so that we might have a relationship with God. Not just a vague knowledge about God but a real intimate relationship – life to the full.

A chance to know God for all eternity. Not just a bunch of rules to live by. But a restored relationship with the God who made us. How do we know it's true?

Well the evidence comes in various forms. There are transformed lives and experiences of millions of Christian people around the globe. There is the pressing logic of the truth of Christian claims when compared to our experience of the world around us. But most of all there is the witness of history. Because in real space and time, just a matter of months at most after the events recorded in

this chapter, Jesus did indeed lay down his life, on a Roman cross. It really happened. He really died and rose again from the dead.

If you doubt the truth of the Christian claim then I invite you simply to look at the evidence. It is astonishingly persuasive.

Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby school, educational reformer, and Oxford Professor of History said:

"I have been used for many years to studying the histories of other times, and to examining and weighing the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of the fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead."

The objective evidence of history, recorded by numerous writers, preserved in different documents, is that the Christian message is true. Supremely, of course, that history is recorded for us in the Bible itself, the most perfect and reliable document from the ancient world.

Christianity is not boring: because Jesus, whom Christians trust and follow, is the most fascinating person who ever lived. Christianity is not untrue: because Jesus is the truth. Christianity is not irrelevant: because Jesus offers exactly what we need. He offers a solution to our most profound problem – that of alienation from God – and a right perspective on every major issue facing you and me this evening.

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