

If I were God... I'd make myself clearer
Christ Church Liverpool
September 2004

I was in Keith's Wine Bar recently. I don't know if you've ever been – it's on Lark Lane, just off Sefton Park, and, whenever you're not at The Pilgrim, I'd recommend it as an excellent place for a drink and some food.

At first sight, as you take a seat, Keith's seems to be just like any one of a hundred thousand European pubs, cafes and wine bars. The food looks, smells and tastes great. There is a selection of beers, wines and soft drinks. There are blokes reading "Stuff" magazine, girls reading Cosmo and Company and people of both sexes reading Your Move.

People eating, drinking, being merry and finding out how much more their houses are worth than they were when they bought them. It is a kind of temple to materialist consumer culture.

But if, like me, you were to sit in Keith's at lunchtime on a Friday and look a bit more carefully you'd see that there's more going on than just straightforward hedonism.

If you looked over to the notice board they have pinned up by the door there are all sorts of classes, discussions and debates advertised. There's a meeting you can go to organised by the Stop-the-War and Anti-privatisation coalition. Interesting combination of issues! There are adverts for classes to help you out with your spirituality. And there's philosophy in the pub – a weekly discussion group talking about issues of philosophy over a pint and a packet of crisps.

And it struck me, sitting there enjoying my cheese and bacon on toasted foccacia bread with mustard mayonnaise (it's that kind of place), that Keith's is really a little microcosm of our world. The centre of it is basically completely materialistic. But stuck away in a corner, although they are not the most important things, issues of significance, of religion, of spirituality, issues about meaning and purpose in life just refuse to go away.

And no matter how secular our society gets it seems that these kind of philosophical or religious issues just refuse to be swept under the carpet. As much as we love our chardonnay and our BMWs human beings are incurably interested in something more.

Maybe that's why you've come along this evening – or maybe you were just fed up with your Christian friend nagging you and thought you'd better come just to shut them up! Maybe, like I

was, you are a self-confessed atheist who rejects everything religious as just a product of our imaginations, and yet find yourself strangely drawn towards spiritual questions.

All of which makes me ask a question.

Why, since so many people are genuinely interested in other dimensions to life, in things beyond what we can see or smell or touch, why do people find Christians so annoying? After all most people are pretty sympathetic to the idea of spirituality. So why are they so irritated by Christians?

My experience of talking to people is that what most people find irritating Christians is **our** certainty. What gets people's goat is the definiteness of Christian belief. One university lecturer put it like this:

If anyone says they are right and everyone else is wrong, that is when I start to know that they are talking rubbish.

After all with so many competing religious claims in the world who are Christians to be so confident that they have it right?

Maybe this evening you feel that Christians do with a bit less of their irritating certainty and a bit more openness to the possibility that others might have useful and truthful insights to bring?

Because, let's face it, there are plenty of religious claims out there aren't there? And, as far as most people are concerned, it's not at all obvious how to choose between them. It seems as if God just hasn't really left us with any signposts to tell us what to believe about him. So until God makes himself quite a lot clearer, we really need to be a lot more tolerant with each other than it seems Christians often are.

In the end, of course then, the real question is: Why doesn't God make himself clearer?

And that's not a new question. In fact it's a question that has been asked by human beings since the dawn of time.

And we're going to spend the next 20 minutes or so this evening thinking about it with the help of a 2,000 year old speech. You'll find some copies of the speech on the tables in front of you.

The speech was made by the great writer and Christian thinker Paul of Tarsus and it was

written down by Luke, the writer of one of the 4 gospel accounts of Jesus' life and also author of the book of the Bible we call Acts – which is a history of the first years of the church after Jesus' death and resurrection.

In this book of Acts Luke shows how the Christian message spread like wildfire around the Mediterranean region and how it captured the hearts and minds of people as diverse as religious Jews, Greek prison warders, Macedonian businessmen and Italian army officers.

The speech we have in front of us was made to the Areopagus – a kind of intellectual debating chamber made up of the Athenian elite. It was **the** premier place to be asked to present your ideas or philosophy – a bit like being asked to give the Reith lectures on Radio 4. And Paul had been invited to go there to talk about Jesus Christ.

Paul had seen that the Athenians, like people in every culture and every part of the world before and since, were interested in religious and spiritual things. In fact the Athenians were so keen that they wanted to cover all the options.

It was said there were more gods than people in ancient Athens but, just in case they had missed one of the spiritual powers that they believed influenced their life and city, some enterprising folk had put up an altar to an unknown god.

Picking up on this obvious interest in spiritual things Paul addresses the gathered audience.

Acts 17:22-34

The first thing we need to notice is that although Paul is courteous and polite to his esteemed audience he doesn't include any flannel.

He wants them to be quite clear from the very beginning that what he is going to say challenges the commonly held Athenian assumptions about what God is like.

God, Paul says, does not live in temples that people build, contrary to the standard thinking of the day.

And the real god, the God who is there, Paul says, does not need people to come and offer sacrifices of food and drink in order to make sure he is looked after because everything in the universe comes from God – he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

And God, v29, is not like an idol – a divine being who can be shaped as their ideas see fit.

All in all it's fair to say that Paul was convinced that the truth about who God is and what he is like is clear.

How God has clearly revealed himself Paul comes to later but that God has clearly revealed himself is in no doubt.

But the fact that God has revealed what he is like has implications. Especially it means that God is not like some other things!

So, Paul says, God made everything. And the implication of that is that God needs nothing from us. God is in no way dependent on human beings.

Now I'm guessing pretty confidently that most people here this evening don't take a C1st Greek view of what God is like. You probably don't have a shiny idol in a shrine, unless you count that beautiful silver car you look at every time you pass the garage.

But essence of Paul's message remains true in every culture and every age.

The Christian message about what God is like always challenges people's conceptions about God.

Any sort of clarity about who God is and his character always collides with what people want to think about what God is like.

Because, although we may not have idols like the ancients did, just like them we sophisticated C21st people love to conform God to our own ideas.

So we love the idea of a God who watches over my steps and keeps me going in the right direction in my relationships and my career... but we don't really want him to have too much to say about moral standards. Or at the very least we want him to be extremely tolerant of our own personal little peccadilloes.

We love the idea of a God who presides over an eternal paradise... but we don't really want him to have too much to say about any kind of final judgment.

Well if we take Paul at his word that simply won't do. Because the God who is there has revealed what he is like. And that means that we are not at liberty to think of him as we choose – we need to respond to him as he is.

Well you may think that's fair enough.

But why should we choose to believe Paul's claims about the nature of God rather than those of, say, Mohammed or Buddha?

Well that's really the heart of the case that the Apostle Paul set out in his speech to those people in Athens.

V30-31: Paul's contention is that we are accountable to God for the things that we think and say about him. He commands us to stop thinking about him wrongly and to start worshipping him rightly. And he has appointed a judge who will hold all of humanity to account. This judge is a man, the only man, who has died and risen again – Jesus Christ.

It is this that puts the Christian message in a different category from the teachings of all the other major religions of the world.

Take Buddhism for example, a religion which is very popular with leisured Westerners. Buddhism tells us that Gautama the Buddha spent 7 years of contemplation before receiving enlightenment. He received insight into the goal of life, the nature of the afterlife and the ethical standard required for people who also wanted to become enlightened. There is no way that anybody can either test or even really investigate whether than enlightenment ever happened or whether it is valid. In the end you either accept the sayings of Buddha as a matter of faith or you don't.

That doesn't necessarily mean that Buddhism is untrue. It's just simply not verifiable. It rests on a set of ideas that cannot ever be tested. And the same is true of the central teachings of all the major religions. So it is central to Islam that Allah requires 5 times of prayer a day. Muslims know that because Allah revealed it to Mohammed, Mohammed proclaimed it to his disciples and it was recorded in the Koran.

But Christianity is different. Because the central claim, the central teaching, around which everything else fits, of the Christian faith is a claim that can be investigated. It is a claim that provides an answer to the question "why doesn't God make himself clearer?"

And it's the central claim in Paul's message to the Athenians:

"He has given proof of this to all men by raising him [Jesus Christ] from the dead."

Paul's claim, and the Christian message, is not some set of timeless philosophical truths. The Christian message is that in a person, in Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself and his plans to the human race.

And, if you read more of the Bible, you'll discover that, even more daringly, the Christian claim is that the events of Jesus life, death and resurrection don't simply make God known to us – they make God knowable by us.

In other words what Jesus achieved in his historical death on a Roman cross and resurrection from the grave of a Jewish nobleman enables us to know the God who is there is a way that is otherwise impossible.

In other words the Christian claim is that God has made himself clear and he has done so in Jesus Christ.

Now I don't expect this evening's talk to persuade you that Christianity is true.

But what I do want to do is to persuade you that Christianity is not some vague philosophy or merely a way of becoming a nicer person.

I hope you'll leave here this evening interested enough to recognise that if you want some clarity about who God is and what he is like the Christian message, and the accounts of Jesus' life that we call the gospels are an excellent place to start.

The book about Jesus that we call the Bible is historical, incredibly well documented and its claims have been exhaustively tested by people dating documents, archaeologists, anthropologists and many more.

The Christian message is that in a person, in Jesus Christ, God has clearly revealed himself and his plans to the human race.

That has to be worth at least a look.

But I'd like to finish really with an appeal. Because one important thing that we have to realise in thinking about these issues is that many of us have a serious vested interest in keeping things vague.

After all if we admitted that, for example, the claims of Jesus Christ are true, that would have huge implications for how we live and think. And, perhaps most importantly for many of us, our friends, family or colleagues might think we had lost the plot. So we often welcome anything that helps us retain our vagueness.

You can see that at a national and international scale in the media. One newspaper recently ran an article that argued that Jesus is shared by Islam and Christianity.

The writer attempted to persuade readers that we are all really talking about the same thing by saying that the Muslim Jesus is:

"Not the Jesus who was the Son of God, admittedly, and who was crucified, but certainly the Jesus who was the Messiah and miracle worker, who conversed regularly with God, who was born of a virgin and who ascended into heaven."

This, picture of Jesus, the writer said, crosses the great divide. So that's OK then isn't it?

Islam and Christianity are basically the same so I can pick one or the other or, more likely, just muddle along OK without either, because it clearly doesn't really matter that much what you choose.

Well actually it's not OK. Because that article is simply a load of rubbish.

For the Christian, as Paul has shown in his speech in Athens, the most important things about Jesus are that he was crucified and rose from the dead to bring about the salvation of all people who put their trust in him. A Jesus who is not crucified and raised from the dead is not the Jesus Christians worship. But that writer wasn't writing to persuade people to become Muslims.

He was writing to make the average reader, who is neither Christian or Muslim, think that we are really all talking about the same thing, when we aren't.

And people love that kind of article, because it justifies our basic preference for keeping things vague so we don't have to change anything about how we think or live.

Can I encourage you not to be like that? Can I encourage you to be honest with yourself, to recognise that it really does matter in our world what we believe about God and to join one of two groups from that 1st century lecture in Athens.

Some sneered.

But some wanted to know more. If that's you there's a chance for questions afterwards. Stay and chat. CE.

And some believed. I don't know whether that happened straight away or after they had chatted further.

But they recognised that in the person of Jesus Christ God has clearly revealed himself to the

human race and provided a way to know him forever.

Andrew Evans
September 2004