

Jesus of Nazareth Taught:

Love & the Kingdom of God

*NOT
Sin
Salvation &
Atonement*

by Phil Simister

*An Introduction
for the Questioning mind
to the God we see in Jesus*

SYNOPSIS

Around 3000 years ago the evolution of humanity saw our species develop an extra spiritual dimension, wherein people started asking questions about the meaning of life and of God(s). Towards the end of what is now known as the Axial Age, and in just one of the world's great strands of religious thought, an itinerant healer/preacher with a transformational approach to Judaism emerged.

For 2000 years Christians have wrestled with two very different, almost contrasting, strands of thought; which very soon became a blended hybrid of understanding the nature of God as seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and understanding what the Jesus, acclaimed as the Christ, represents. Before the advent of Jesus we have another fifteen hundred to 2000 years in which a people, known first as the Hebrews and then as the Jews, come to an understanding of a single God: 1000 of those 2000 years are covered with reasonably accurate records and there's a further thousand years back of race memory. When it comes to church sermons across the land, however, we revert to simplistic, cartoon like, word pictures: as though what we see described in bible passages can be accepted exactly as it happened and exactly as the English words imply; and yet at the same time members of our congregations privately express grave reservations nay incredulity as to the historicity and accuracy of the documents we are preaching from.

During those three or four thousand years ideas have been mulled, shaken & stirred. Those ideas may still be current; but equally they've often been part discarded whilst remaining influential and only shallowly understood; and therefore they affect us today without us realising it. This is a crude attempt to shape a context for the Bible and for Christian thought in way that makes sense to an open & questioning mind coming to Christian belief for the first time: one that disregards the simplified, 'cartoon like' approach frequently used for newcomers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is not an attempt at a history of Christian thought and practice. If you want to learn more about that I'd recommend Diarmaid MacCulloch's *A History of Christianity*; and I would also suggest that an enquiring mind would be advised to read Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* to understand Christianity in a wider context. Her work in particular has taken me in new directions. Finally I'd recommend Kurt Struckmeyer's *People of the Way* for an alternative perspective on the early Jesus movement; and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Religionless Christianity* - it makes you think.

David Jenkins whose time as Bishop of Durham coincided with my time as a student in the North East was a mesmerising speaker. I only heard him twice live but his written words, his utterances in the press and on TV/radio opened my mind to what theologians thought and to what the clergy were taught. I need to credit Joel B Green & Mark D Baker's book *'Recovering The Scandal Of The Cross'* for their work on Atonement theory, I need to credit Carol Hibberd for the idea of "letting every little thing you do contribute to the Kingdom of God": it's an idea which cuts through to the core of how to behave as a Christian. Finally, my father is a preacher and thinker par excellence who provides an almost unique & unparalleled approach from the pulpit. My mother has been an energetic force in whichever community she's been, excelling as a classicist and as a musician. Together, however, in the light of Jesus' words, they've shown me what God is like to us his/her children – and how therefore we should view him/her/it.

LOVE & THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CONTENTS

OBJECTIVE

PART 1 – CONTEXT & THE BIBLE

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 2 - Context

Chapter 3 - World of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

Chapter 4 - Judaism at the Time Of Jesus

Chapter 5 - New Testament

Chapter 6 - What Jesus Actually Preached & Why

Chapter 7 - Critical Mistranslations of New Testament
Words

PART 2 - CHRISTIAN BELIEF, PRACTICE & DISPUTE

Chapter 8 - Essence of Jesus' Life & Mission

Chapter 9 - Perspectives Within Christianity

Chapter 10 - Christian Festivals

Chapter 11 - Christian Dispute

PART 3 - IN ADDITION

Chapter 12 - The Trinity (More)

Chapter 13 - God's Plan for Us

Chapter 14 - Fact or Fiction: The Story of Jesus

Chapter 15 - How Could Jesus Be Both Human And Divine

Chapter 16 - Mary Magdalene

Chapter 17 - The Church Good Or Bad

Chapter 18 - Misc

- Prayer
- Doubt is Healthy
- The Virgin Birth And Why It Doesn't Matter
- Do You Have To Go To Church To Be A Christian
- The Church as a Pilot Light in the Community

PART 4 – ATONEMENT v LOVE

Chapter 19 - Atonement: The Dark Side Of Christianity

Chapter 20 – Jesus Taught Love

Chapter 21 – A Change from Love to Sin & Salvation

Chapter 22 - If Not Salvation Then What?

PART 5 - UPDATING OUR VIEW of GOD

Chapter 23 - An Alternative 21C Model of God

Chapter 24 - The Way We Think About God, How We Should Respond To Him/Her/It & How to Behave as a Christian

PART 6 – HOW WE GOT HERE & WHERE NEXT

Chapter 25 - The Two Poles of Christianity

Chapter 26 – An Alternative Perspective

- Borg's Paradigms
- Harnessing The Passion Of Youth
- Messianic Role Within Its Real Life Context
- Prophecy
- Evil
- Called to be Fully Human

Chapter 27 - Dietrich Bonheffer

Chapter 28 - An Ecumenical & Multifaith View

FINALLY

OBJECTIVE

This book has grown in size and in scope since I first began it. I started it in frustration as to what was available for a new arrival to my then church who had no background in anything to do with God, Jesus or the Bible – very much as a ‘Dummies Guide to the God we see in Jesus’ a la the popular beginners guides to computers or mobile phones.

Part 1 attempts to give the overall historical context: starting with the origins of the people who became known as the Hebrews in what Christians call the Old Testament (the original Hebrew Bible read also by Jews & Muslims) and going on to the books of faith that recorded the life, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Part 2 deals with some of the details of early Christianity – perspectives, festivals & disputes. Part 3 tries to answer some of the more basic questions that people might have if they have not grown up immersed in Christian thinking.

It has been suggested that the book, from Part 4 onwards, actually requires a degree of understanding outside the remit of a ‘Dummies Guide’. That is probably so as the issues being described became more complex. If, however, it makes of the script a progressive learning opportunity by encouraging you to read and think before coming back to it, that is all to the good. Certainty is the enemy of love and tolerance; whereas a questioning mind keeps itself open to the things that mattered to the God we see in Jesus.

PART 1 – CONTEXT & THE BIBLE

This first section is an attempt to set the broader scene for newcomers to Christianity and the Bible. It covers the people we know as the Hebrews and latterly the Jews. It describes the world that Jesus was born into; and describes the basics of how the Bible came into being.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Around 3000 years ago evolving humanity saw our species acquire an extra spiritual dimension, where they started asking questions about the meaning of life and of God(s). Near the end of what we know as the Axial Age, almost two thousand years ago and in just one of humanity great strands of religious thought, a man in his mid/late 30s tried to bring renewal to Judaism by preaching: a threefold message of: love for God AND your neighbour - which he linked inextricably; the imminence of the Kingdom of God - where truth, love & justice flourish; and a change of heart & mind - erroneously translated into English as repentance. This man was born into an interconnected world of Greek and Jewish thought, both of which operated under the blanket of the Pax Romana. He himself claimed a special relationship with God and spoke of himself variously as 'the Son of Man' & 'the Son' - referring to God as 'daddy'. After starting to heal and preach himself, he then successively sends first his inner 12 disciples out to preach and then a wider set of followers out to spread the message of renewal. Then he starts predicting his own death to his followers. He was crucified by the Romans, at the behest to some degree of the Jewish/Temple religious authorities, and, as he died the painful and degrading death of all Roman political executions, experienced the desperation & sense of failure that is the lot of man.

On the 'third day' however his closest followers experienced his presence with them once again and remembered his teaching of resurrection. So began one of

the world's great religions in which his early Jewish followers came to see Jesus as Son of God; as someone special; certainly as more than merely human; and showing us the nature of God.

What you have just read is a traditional and largely uncontentious reading of the accounts we have of Jesus and his ministry. At both ends of the spectrum of belief we have two very different perspectives though.

One is a little known but immensely plausible reading of the gospels looking at the life, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in very human terms; and to the sympathetic but questioning mind it bears the 'sniff' of authenticity. In this alternative understanding of what happened this man came into powder keg of a situation where his mentor/cousin, acting very like the prophets of old, warned of dire consequences if the social inequalities emerging as part of a drive to large agri-businesses capable of supporting Roman taxes were not tackled: where the hammer of Rome was likened to the interventions that saw the Assyrian empire eliminate the northern Kingdom of Israel in the years running up to 722 BCE and then saw the Babylonian empire carry off the rulers of the southern Kingdom of Judea into exile in 587 BCE.

In this reading of what records we have Jesus starts off as a hell fire prophet in the same vein as his mentor/cousin but then rethinks his mission as one of healing and Love with a radical, ground up, message of transformation which would change not only the society of the day but every aspect of

human life. This reading of history takes Jesus out of a world where his target is the Jewish authorities, in a totally religious context, and moves it into one where his is confronting the very real social inequalities caused by the actions of those ruling the Roman province of Palestine – including the might of Rome itself.

The other take, widely accepted by vast swathes of Conservative Evangelical Christians, treats English translations of the original Hebrew Bible, which Christians know as the Old Testament, and of the New Testament as an accurate and unquestionable record; it misunderstands the meaning of the Greek word ‘logos’ from which the phrase ‘the Word of God’ is derived and substitutes the Bible for the man Jesus as the ‘Word of God; it treats the English meaning of words as sacrosanct; it disregards contradiction and known mistranslations as part of God’s ‘hidden plan’; it regards Jesus as a hybrid man/God; and takes the concept of atonement – Jesus dying as atonement either for the sins of mankind incurred when Adam ‘ate of the apple’ or for the 16C concept of each individual, personal sins of the sort developed 400 years after the era of Jesus’ life and death – as deadly serious; and it was a product of an early 20C fundamentalism that developed in the USA as a reaction to rapidly changing scientific understandings about the mechanism of the world and its evolution.

The driving source of what eventually became known as Christianity was the Pharisee ‘Saul of Tarsus’ who as St Paul aggressively proselytized within the gentile (non Jewish) Hellenistic (Greek) world. After a vision/psychological

experience Paul turned from aggressively persecuting the early followers of Jesus and became an ardent proselytiser. In the process though he took what was a radical social mission/gospel which Jesus and his followers had preached/accepted - showing us what mattered to God and what God was like - and transformed it into a gospel about what Jesus WAS. Put another way, he took Jesus' teachings about what he (Jesus) tells us about God and changed it into a message about Jesus himself.

In the course of what has turned out to be a wildly successful mission of proselytisation the alternative reading of the accounts we have been left with might say that the original message of Jesus, kept alive by the original leaders of the new Nazarene sect, by which the early followers of Jesus were known, gradually faded into become more of a support act for the supernatural message about Jesus as Christ as driven by Paul.

Over those first three centuries Greek thought came to dominate the Nazarene sect; and it completed the change from radical message for Jews of a Kingdom of God, where truth, justice and love would be the hallmarks of a loving God, into a message of inner spirituality. Assisted by slight mistranslations from Greek to Latin, the message of Jesus later became further modified in a manner appealing to the Emperor Constantine when he legalised Christianity nearly 300 years later (ten years after Diocletian made the most significant attempt to stamp it out) and which led to the declaration of intellectual belief we know as the Nicene Creed: a creed which transformed Christianity from a socially

radical, caring, practical example of 'doing love' & 'making real the Kingdom of God' to an inner spirituality of sin & salvation; which aped all the Axial Age religions and defenestration Christian belief of any practical threat to the established order.

Up until the 'nationalisation' of Christianity by Constantine there is another possible explanation for the heavily theoretical, theological underpinnings of Christian practice over most of the next 1700 years. Early Christian practice was dominated by women and revolved around communal acts of love and sharing. Even the great, radical theologian Tertullian talks about the practice of shared, community meals. It is therefore possible that the essence of Christian practice for the first three hundred years WAS the sort of community action that Jesus preached and that the theological musings that so dominate Christianity today were merely the icing on the cake - theoretical models used to rehabilitate someone who died the humiliating and revolting death of an insurrectionist – and that after Christianity became respectable and 'inwardly spiritual' rather than 'outwardly social' the icing was all that was left to be remembered. The communal, loving, caring and sharing was forgotten except in some small vestige of memory which remained – more about that later.

The central element of the new 'male dominated', 'career friendly', 'inward looking' spirituality was an understanding of God as a Trinitarian entity – a model of God as God the father, God the Son & God the Holy Spirit. This understanding of a God had itself developed from an original,

subtle Greek understanding of three aspects of God through to a more direct Latin understanding, and then to the increasingly primitive 'cartoon like' medieval western understanding most people keep today: the result leaving many parts of the church of God picturing Jesus as God walking around on earth omniscient and omnipotent in capability and merely human & limited by choice.

As Christianity moved, from the subtle & nuanced into a 'more direct' understanding of belief & leadership, and then into an era where a few intellectually challenging theologians were segregated from a populous kept backward by a church jealously maintaining its position as an intermediary in Western Europe, it took up intolerant & cruel aspects which lie far from the original message of God as represented by Jesus. As important though was the marginalisation of questioning about what Jesus of Nazareth, who we know as the Christ, represents; such that when humankind 'moved on' in its thinking about the mechanism & processes of the world (in the era we call the Enlightenment (itself building on Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek & Arabic thought) Christian dogma seems/seemed increasingly irrelevant.

In particular there is this issue of the transformation from an outward message of love – a message which comes from the Jewish Rabbi Hillel in the generation before Jesus (overlapping by 10 years and surely influencing him) and which was then espoused by Jesus - into a concept of personal sin which had changed from the Jewish understanding of 'failure' & 'missing the mark' into twisted

& distorted acts of mini evil requiring salvation. This later concept was alien to Jews like Jesus & Paul and it leaves Christianity struggling to reconcile our beliefs - loyalty, commitment & intellectual - about the fundamental truths of God's Creation with a modern, scientific understanding of the mechanism/ processes of Creation/the Universe.

Stripped however of human speculation and its attempts to describe the unknowable - which is exactly what theology is - Christian belief, both in its original sense of commitment & loyalty and in its 'post translation manifestation' as intellectual thought, is simple:

- 'God is': there is a God so life has meaning.
- 'God is as we see in Jesus': we see God, or the nature of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
- 'God is love': the nature or essence of God is love.
- There is some form of existence after death.

Anything and everything else is theological speculation. As such it informs debate but can never be considered definitively fundamental. In truth Christian thought has been recast a number of times through history and some of the ideas we are left with betray the thought processes of former and more primitive times - thoughts baked in for reasons both 'small p' political AND 'big P' Political.

In fact even the four statements listed above as 'definitively fundamental' would cause more radical progressive thinkers to demur: mindsets and thinking which take many years to evolve.

One suspects that the different casts we take to the message & mission of Jesus have been conditioned by the era in which we live(ed) and the ideas current at the time. It's no wonder therefore that ideas surrounding Jesus' birth became popular, as was later the Trinity, being a product of Greek thought following disgrace of the Jews after the two revolts which saw Jerusalem & the Temple razed and the Jews expelled from Jerusalem. The supernatural element of Jesus' birth blossomed within a tradition of Greek legend where men & gods interact, so being a man part God and part human would seem normal; and in the Trinity we see the result both of subtle Greek thought and of the fact that Greek theatre used masks to change the characters played by the same actors in a play – the original basis of the idea.

The concept of ideas being conditioned by the time in which influential thinkers lived applies to Augustine of Hippo's ideas on sin and particularly the idea of original sin – misogynistically transmitted by women. One of the Western church's most influential thinkers, the brilliant theologian we know as St Augustine was living at a time when the Roman Empire was crumbling; and, in the process of recovering from his own mental breakdown, he is looking for society's sins to explain what is happening to his world. In fact this has been a common factor through history - from the Hebrews after the northern kingdom of Israel is defeated in 722BCE to the Muslim empire trying to understand why its world is failing in the 17/18C. Augustine's ideas came at the beginning of a period for western Christianity where it was sundered from its more subtle 'and clever' eastern cousin and where fell in to a darker and more primitive period following the demise

of the Roman Empire and the arrival of the 'barbarian' tribes; all coming after Constantine had set the imperial seal on the model of Christianity hammered out at Nicaea. To an extent Christian thinking froze and people stopped playing with ideas, in the main, until a time 1500 years later. By that time secular society was in the throes of 'the Enlightenment' which inevitably led to agnosticism and atheism given the childish & cartoon-like defence a deeply conservative church tried to mount against these 'dangerous' ideas.

We need to take the opportunity for a new model of God & Jesus. One that relates to the world we live in and that uses the ideas produced by the scientific understanding of the mechanisms of the world which we have grown up with and which we accept all the other aspects of our lives. This book is MY 'starter for ten'.

To quote the synopsis:

'For 2000 years Christians have wrestled with two different strands of thought that soon became conflated: first, understanding the nature of God as seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; and second understanding what the Jesus acclaimed as the Christ represents. Before that we have another fifteen hundred to 2000 years in which the people known first as the Hebrews and then the Jews come to an understanding of a single God: 1000 of those 2000 years are covered with reasonably accurate records and then there is a further thousand years back of race memory. When it comes to Sunday morning sermons

across the land, however, we revert to simplistic, cartoon like, word pictures: as though what we see described in bible passages can be accepted exactly as it happened and exactly as the English words imply; and yet at the same time members of our congregations privately express grave reservations nay incredulity as to the historicity and accuracy of the documents we are preaching from.

‘During those three or four thousand years ideas have been mulled, shaken & stirred. They may still be current but equally they’ve often been part discarded whilst remaining influential and only shallowly understood; but they probably affect us today without us realising it.’

I am assuming a questing and interested mind when attempting to describe the spectrum of Christian for a newcomer to the Bible & to the Church at large. The aim being to take someone with no background whatsoever in the subject and get them started. Where sections should be understood as opinion, rather than undisputed fact or accepted historical information, words like ‘arguably’ have been used to make it crystal clear. All dates are quoted in CE & BCE – ‘common era’ and ‘before common era’ – which is the modern usage amongst historians and equates to AD & BC in ‘old money’ terms.

Before we attempt a revised model of understanding, appropriate for the 21C let us look back on how we got here and what our existing ideas actually mean.

CHAPTER 2 - CONTEXT

Working from an historical perspective rather than merely taking the account at face value, the story of the Jews, of Christianity and of Islam begins with groups of misfits & outcasts emigrating from a part of the world containing the two great early civilisations of Sumer in Mesopotamia and then later Egypt. These misfits and outcasts came together at different times in the Canaanite Highlands in the mid 2C BCE and then emerge into history as a people known as the Hebrews. They brought with them the legends & different words for 'God' which give us clues as to their origins; and over a period of hundreds of years wove their different strands into a single narrative. We know, for example, that the story of Noah's Flood mirrors exactly an earlier Sumerian legend from Mesopotamia known as the Gilgamesh Epics; dating from the time when sea levels rose at the end of the last ice age. David Rohl's plausible account in his 'Legend: The Genesis Of Civilisation' dates this to 3100 BCE when the land bridge into the Black Sea crumbled and sea levels rose drastically. Using geographical and linguistic clues he has also plausibly identified the Garden of Eden with the fertile valley between Tabriz in Iran and Lake Urmia, 37 miles to the west. It is an area that has modern day Turkey to the West and modern Armenia and Azerbaijan to the east. Separately historians have found evidence of a Semitic city in Egypt's Nile delta abandoned in the era of Moses & the escape from Egypt. Finally in Karen Armstrong's A History Of God she clearly identifies two distinctly different words for God used in different parts of the book of Genesis, which tells us that different parts have differing cultural sources.

Both the Hebrew Bible (THE Bible to Jews & Muslims and the Old Testament to Christians) and the Christian New Testament are collections of documents of faith written by a variety of different authors: all with different agendas and different objectives. As Rabbi Lionel Blue once said 'the Bible is a record of what happened, what people think happened and what they thought it all meant'. A questioning reader will view the collection as a series of 'experimental notebooks' from which trends & understandings can be detected. A conservative is more likely to take the position that the documents are inspired by God (rather than being evidence of an emerging faith IN God); a modern conservative is arguably less inclined to question the documents than was the case previously; and a fundamentalist views the books as being dictated by God and therefore sacrosanct.

The Hebrew bible charts an emerging belief in a single God. It starts with the myths of the Hebrew people and goes on to record their history whilst both describing their emerging belief in a single God and mapping the development of these ideas into the faith we call Judaism. In fact there have been three times in ancient history when different strands of civilisation have come to a belief in a single god. With roots in the 2nd millenia BCE, Zoroastrianism was the state religion for Persian empires from 600 BCE to the coming of Islam in 650 CE; and separately Pharaoh Akhenaten also adopted a single god belief in Ancient Egypt circa 1350/1000 BCE (old chronology/new chronology). It is the beliefs of the Hebrews/Jews, however, that have formed the basis of religions that cover over half the world's population today with Christianity (31%) and Islam (25%).

Christians value the Hebrew Bible because Christianity emerged as a sect from Judaism and because the early followers of Jesus came to believe that he was the prophesied Messiah or Christ (Greek name for the Messiah) so looked for & 'cherry picked' evidence that he had fulfilled key prophesies. Christians came to see themselves as the true 'people of God' which the Jews have always felt themselves to be. Arguably, Christians also value it because the 'black and white' stories of the Hebrew bible were easier to deal with than the more demanding message of Jesus.

Whilst the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament charts the development of a belief in a single God, the New Testament records and explores an emerging narrative that in Jesus of Nazareth we see the NATURE of God; and furthermore that we should think in terms of a relationship, both with God and with our fellow humans, that is distinctly different from what went before. It is based on four, related accounts of the life, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We know them as the gospels. It includes an account of the immediate period after Jesus' death & resurrection known as The Acts of The Apostles. It preserves a number of major letters (known as the 'epistles') written by the founders of those emerging Christian communities around the Mediterranean in the first 20 years after Jesus' death - written in response to particular situations/issues they faced but then expanding upon how to live & what to believe; and finally it includes one apocalyptic tract which no one really understands (Revelations).

There are a number of other books of faith that DIDN'T make it into the final New Testament canon; largely because they were felt to have been written later on in the first few hundred years of Christian history. NOT as the Dan Brown's bestselling book 'The Da Vinci Code' has it, because they were suppressed but rather because they were not deemed authentic.

We know that Jesus was crucified in 30 or 33 CE (from clues given by astronomical data and the timing of the Passover festival) and the debate about dating the New Testament ranges from an interesting dating by John A T Robinson, which has the smell of truth but which remains a minority position, of the gospels/epistles being written between 40 & 60 CE, to more common accepted dates of 70 to 90 CE and even to the early part of the 2C around 115 CE.

CHAPTER 3 - WORLD of OLD TESTAMENT/HEBREW BIBLE

The Hebrews emerge as a people in the middle of the second millennium BCE with emigration from Egypt being dated as 1260 BCE or 1447 BCE depending on whether you follow the traditional biblical/Egyptian dating or David Rohl's New Chronology. Interestingly the Hebrew Bible is actually the basis of archaeological dating for Egyptian civilisation with the identification on which Pharaoh it was whose Egyptian army sacked the Temple of Solomon in 925 BCE being the key factor in whether you adopt the conventional dating system or whether you subscribe to the New Chronology.

David Rohl's New Chronology takes issue with the accepted identification with Pharaoh Shoshenk being the nearest archaeologists could find to the 'Shishak' recorded as having sacked the Temple and replaces it with a theory that is so delightfully elegant as to need disproving if it's not to be accepted. Shisha was known to be the pet name of Pharaoh Ramesses the Great whereas Shishak in Hebrew means raper and despoiler. Hebrew poetry aims to twist the meanings of words and Rohl's theory is that the play on words – 'Shishak' in the Hebrew Bible record with Ramesses private name 'Shisha' - gives us a very different point to cross reference Biblical and Egyptian history. That is but one leg of a manifold & complex argument; but the result is both that c300 years are removed from recorded Egyptian history and that the Exodus now takes place in 1447 BCE rather than 1260 BCE; and also that the Late Bronze Age is brought forward in time. Ramesses the Great and the sacking of the Temple are now

Late Bronze Age events rather than incidents dated to the Early Iron Age. This becomes critical when you understand that historians and archaeologists have never been able to find hard evidence for this apogee of Hebrew civilisation, where Kings Saul, David & Solomon bestrode the land that Jews through history have always looked back to. Assuming this elegant theory is correct archaeologists have been looking in the wrong time and when you start looking in the Late Bronze Age you start finding evidence. Go further back into the Middle Bronze age and you start to find evidence of Jericho being sacked in an era corresponding to the Bible's.

Records of Solomon's Kingdom start to acquire greater substance from the beginning of the 1C BCE. The first five books of the Bible (the Torah) are believed to have been written around mid 700s BCE, recording the aural records of the developing Hebrew people, except for Deuteronomy 'discovered' in 622 BCE and used to harden up the other books just before the Babylonian exile of 586-538 BCE. The Torah is then amended and revised after Babylon qv.

After Solomon the Hebrews divided into two nations: the northern kingdom of Israel comprising 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel and the kingdom of Judah with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The landmass of Judah was a block of land on the west side of the Dead Sea with modern day Jerusalem at its far north and Beersheba at its far south, stretching most of the way to the Mediterranean but not including the coastal strip of the Philistines. Israel was the larger of the two kingdoms, taking approximately the rest of the current landmass of modern Israel, north of Jerusalem.

By 722 BCE the demise of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the dominant Mesopotamian empire of the Assyrians was finished and according to the Bible the 'ten tribes' were carried off into captivity never to be heard of again. We don't know how many people were actually carried off or how many were actually assimilated into their 'sibling' southern kingdom. There has been mythical identification of these ten tribes with the indigenous people of America by the Mormons and with the British by the 19C British Israelites; but realistically, the Samaritans referred to in the Gospels are usually thought to have been the assimilated remnants of the original kingdom of Israel.

By 586 BCE the remaining kingdom of Judah had picked the wrong side in a fight between the empires of Babylonian and Egypt and as a result the leadership of Judah were carried off into captivity in 586 BCE in the established Babylonian pattern. The Babylonian empire was conquered by the Persian empire soon afterwards and the Persian Cyrus the Great allowed the exiled Hebrew intelligentsia to return home – Cyrus was considered by some Jews to have been the prophesied Messiah during the period after the return from exile. Many Hebrews didn't return and in fact Babylon had a significant Jewish population for centuries afterwards. The return to Jerusalem and the beginnings of the restoration of the temple occurred around 538 BCE but by the time of the return the ideas of the Hebrew God taken to Babylon by their captive religious leaders had been modified by exposure to other cultures encountered in Babylon – including Zoroastrianism with its belief in a one god. In fact throughout the history of the three big faiths – Judaism, Christianity &

Islam – big shocks to a civilisation have resulted in major changes in theology. In this case and after two massive shocks to the system of losing Israel and Judah, and with exposure to the one god of Zoroastrianism, the returning leadership of Judah came back with a very different mindset from that they were exiled with. Yahweh had become the ONLY God rather than being the tribal god of the Hebrews – to the consternation of the ‘plebs’ who had remained and who had kept to their original religious practices. A redaction of the Torah then occurred to demonstrate that Yahweh had always been the ONE God of the Hebrews.

In the 500 years after the Babylonian exile the Middle East came to be ruled first by the Persians and then it became part of the Hellenistic world when the empire formed by the Macedonian leader Alexander the Great split after his death; and finally it was ruled by the Romans. The Persians & Babylonians had influenced Judaism. Ptolemy II, the son of Alexander’s Macedonian general Ptolemy, ruling Egypt from Alexander’s new city of Alexandria, organised a translation of the Hebrew Bible as part of the development of Alexandria as the knowledge capital of the world and most of what 1C Christians would actually read was this Greek translation we know as the Septuagint; and finally the Romans gave an ordered framework of peace and security to that part of the world. Despite all the peace and security however the Jews harkened back to memories of autonomy under David and Solomon and the ‘Messiah tradition’ became associated with ‘taking back control’. The Maccabean revolt of 167-160 BCE was led by Judas Maccabee against that part of Alexander the Great’s old empire still ruling Palestine.

The two biggest revolts against the Romans that are very well known was first a big revolt in 66-73 CE (approx 35 to 40 years after Jesus' death) which is when the famous mass suicide at Masada takes place; and then a second significant revolt against the Romans in 132-136 CE, after which the Romans had finally lost patience with the Jews. After this second major revolt was smashed the consequences for the Jews was catastrophic: arguably genocide; hundreds of thousands killed; the same kind of numbers enslaved or expelled; Judea ethnically cleansed; all remaining Jews relocated to Galilee; Jerusalem destroyed with a new Roman city built on top and repopulated. Note that this is critical for understanding the way that the early Christian movement severed ties with Judaism in the late 1C and mid 2C. What is far less known, and is equally important in the story to come is the series of peasant revolts in 4 BCE q.v.

In the early years of what we now call 1C CE a charismatic faith healer with a new way of thinking about God emerged in Northern Palestine. Most scholars seem to accept that Jesus – the name we know him by in the English translation of the GREEK rendering of his Hebrew name (it would normally translated as JOSHUA in an English translation of the Hebrew) - was born between 6 & 4 BCE and calculations by the astronomical data which determined the dating of the Passover festival would indicate that he died in either 30 or 33 CE. The accounts we have of his mission, which last either one or two years, were written by his followers. They are books of faith rather than attempts to present biographical data; and, whilst the alternative

argument in favour of a dating of the first of these records at ten years after his death has a ring of truth and an essential plausibility about it, the greater consensus currently is approximately forty years after his death. If forty years later is true by the time these records of his mission, death & alleged resurrection were made the movement following the death and resurrection of Jesus was spreading around the Mediterranean world; and the letters written to the earliest of these, what had been known in Palestine as the 'Nazarene sect' and would become known later as Christian, communities by those that founded them, are accepted as being dated earlier than the gospels at around ten years after Jesus' death. These letters are known as the epistles.

Far less well known, and referred to earlier, there are a series of peasant revolts in 4 BCE (the later date of an accepted two year window for Jesus' birth) which was harshly put down by the Governor of Syria, Publius Quinctilius Varus including 2000 crucifixions before the walls of Jerusalem. It also the destruction of Sepphoris, a walled city of 30,000 that served as the centre of administration for Galilee; and the enslaving of the population of Sepphoris. There is some doubt as to the degree of destruction given that archaeological support has not been found but the report was from Flavius Josephus who was a Jewish Roman historian and who is one of the main sources on the era. There is obviously a question of how much damage was actually done; however its significance is that Herod the Great's (he of the nativity stories) son Herod Antipas (he of the crucifixion accounts) is said to have rebuilt Sepphoris as the 'Ornament of Galilee'. Now Sepphoris was 4 miles north

of Nazareth and it is almost inconceivable that the jobbing builder/carpenter Jesus of Nazareth did not spend a significant proportion of his working career working on the rebuilding of Sepphoris: seeing the effects of revolt directly; hearing of mass enslavement; and being fully aware of the penalty for going up against Rome.

CHAPTER 4 - JUDAISM AT THE TIME OF JESUS

In parallel with the mission of Jesus, and back BEFORE the time when the Jewish equivalent of the Brexiteers made their disastrous attempt to take back national sovereignty from the most powerful empire in history, one strand of Jewish thought was cross fertilised with Platonic Greek philosophy in the person of Philo of Alexandria (c30 BCE – 45 CE). This blending of Greek philosophy with Jewish/Christian thought was to become central to the story of the development of Christianity.

Coming back, however, to the run up to the life of Jesus in the early 1C three dominant strands had emerged within Judaism:

- The Sadducees who ran the country and managed/served in the temple.
- The Essenes who were a hermit like sect living away from the cities and establishment.
- The Pharisees whose practices centred on synagogues rather than the temple and who had come to believe in resurrection.

Pharisaic thought was very much based on debate and, like philosophers the world over, they would use extreme examples to illustrate their position and tease out answers to their questions. Therefore when we read of debates occurring between Jesus and the Pharisees, the extreme positions they are recorded as taxing Jesus with may only have been their normal way of debating – something

untutored and inexperienced writers, from outside the Pharisaic movement, would not have understood and might therefore have presented as hypocrisy.

Pharisaic thought had divided into two major schools by the time of Jesus. Something like two thirds of Pharisaic thought followed Rabbi Hillel, who believed that love was the central point of Judaism: and in fact so many of the thoughts of Jesus chime with Hillel's ideas that it is tempting to see him, either as a Pharisee of Hillel's school of thought or as someone who had come into contact and been influenced by Hillel. The remain third followed a line of those who wanted everyone to live the standards of the temple priests and for whom sin (remember, strictly translated as 'missing the mark' or 'failing' - to keep to the religious laws) was the key factor: having a law/rule implies that one might fail to keep to that law and so fail, or sin.

Understanding these two strands is arguably critical in comprehending the distinct change in the direction of Christian thought when you compare the mission that Jesus preached to the message coming down the centuries. Jesus followed a line, similar to or inspired by Hillel, where love was one of the key focuses of what he taught. In comparison, Paul, who as the dynamic & driven character who did more than anyone else to found a separate Christian church outside of Judaism couches his thoughts in terms of sin, which implies the minority strand. Paul's letters to the nascent churches around the Mediterranean world that he had founded form the backbone of the body of work we call the epistles and although those letters were written in

response to specific situations their meanings have too often been taken as universal throughout Christian history as the nascent movement became a religion.

The distortions in Christian thinking leading to the idea of 'sin' being at the centre of a revised meaning on the life, death & mission of Jesus of Nazareth will be dealt with later; however, the influential 4/5C CE theologian Augustine of Hippo is one of the dominant figure most associated with it. Augustine's personal crises & tortured personality and the demise of Roman civilisation around him led him to a novel 'twisted & evil' understanding of sin which was totally different to the meaning ascribed to Jesus and the Jews of his time like Paul. From the early days of Christian thinking there had been earlier attempts to cast the deeply humiliating execution by crucifixion in a new light acceptable to people of the Roman world, including one strand representing the crucifixion as some sort of atonement for the fall of Adam at the beginning of Genesis. The combination of the Constantinian era, inward focussing, 'spiritual' Christianity; a creative, theoretical understanding of why 'the Son of God' had to die; and this revised 'twisted & evil' understanding of sin; all set the scene for a more barbaric and bigoted period of Christian history. The theoretical understanding of atonement theory later changed directions unique to the eras in which they lived: Anselm in the 11C and then Luther & Calvin in the 16C, and it is this last set of ideas which constitutes the common understanding of atonement theory of Conservative Evangelicals today: where Christ is deemed to have died on the cross to atone for the sins of the individual. It needs to be reinforced though that 'sin' is NOT

at the centre of Jesus' teaching and in the synoptic (related) gospels of Matthew, Mark & Luke he hardly ever mentions it except as an excuse to get people he has healed moving again. Furthermore, the Orthodox Christian world – the Eastern half of Christendom - never accepted atonement theory or any of its related theologies, either back before the eastern and western churches formally split or to this day. More on this later.

CHAPTER 5 - NEW TESTAMENT

There are four accounts of the mission, death and resurrection of Jesus; however, even apart from the fact that authors were aiming their accounts at different audiences, there are thought to be only three original sources:

The writings of Mark are accepted as being a record of the apostle Peter's memories and Peter's teaching. Possibly it's the same John Mark that travelled with and disappointed Paul in the Acts of the Apostles; and maybe it's the same person that runs away naked in the dark at Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane; and, just possibly it has been suggested, it is the person who goes to the tomb early on 'the third day' to find the body missing – Mark records a YOUNG MAN in white waiting in the tomb when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to find the body missing whereas the other accounts records one or even two angels. Bishop Papius in current day Asia Minor (60 - 130 CE) records John the Elder saying that Mark recorded Peter's memories accurately but in the wrong order because of the way that Peter taught. Therefore, for example, all the Galilean elements are presented as a block as are later events taking place in Jerusalem. Mark and the gospels thought to be based on Mark present Jesus' mission as taking place in a year.

John's gospel has occasioned debate since the very early days of Christian theology because the chronology is very different and the thinking is more advanced:

It had been thought by some of the early Greek writers and later by some of the great German theologians in the late 19C to be a product of the later 2C or even the 3C; however there is a strong argument that puts the dating no later than 90 CE.

John, however, gets the micro detail right in ways that Mark and the other writers based on Mark q.v. don't. For instance Mark, Matthew & Luke use the Greek word 'ichthys' for fish in the story of the loaves & fishes. In comparison John uses 'opsarion'; and opsarion was a relish used as a way of getting fish from Lake Galilea to market in Jerusalem, 76 miles away by donkey, without the fish rotting. John knows because either John was there or John KNOWS someone who was there. In addition John's chronology of Jesus moving around the country, and down to Jerusalem, over a two year period 'fits' Christian tradition; and it's often said that we need John to provide the 'colour and chronology' that we understand & accept. In fact Bishop John Robinson argues for the possibility that John was there, that John was even possibly the disciple John son of Zebedee, and that his more advanced thinking is accounted by the way someone develops as they gets older.

The third source account is known by scholars as 'Q' and it's hypothesised that Jesus' teachings were recorded as he went round Galilee. In Matthew and Luke Jesus' teaching is presented as a block in the Sermon On The Mount; but teachers don't reinvent lesson plans and rather use the same

lesson over and over again. It is reasonable to assume therefore that the Sermon on the Mount is a faithful rendition of Jesus' teaching throughout that period in Galilee.

German scholars in the 19C first came to the conclusion that everything in Mark is also in Matthew and Luke, with the addition in both of 'Q' source material. The three related gospels Matthew and Luke along with Mark on which their structure is based are known as the 'synoptic' gospels. The differences between Matthew and Luke therefore come down to who their target audience was:

Matthew is thought to have been writing for Jews and, for example, always refers to 'the Kingdom of Heaven' because Jews wouldn't say the name of God. Similarly in the nativity narratives (which only exist in Matthew & Luke and which were POSSIBLY embroideries written to glorify who Jesus became) Matthew concentrates of the wise men from afar to highlight the glory of Jesus' origins.

In comparison Luke was writing for the new gentile communities and concentrates on the humble witnesses of shepherds.

Mark and John need to be seen as 'prime' records whilst Matthew & Luke need to be seen as providing the meat of the early Galilean based ministry. It is clear that neither Mark or John have any interest in the birth of Jesus and it's only the later, derivative writers, Matthew & Luke, who present the accounts later amalgamated into our

nativity narrative. Luke presents the shepherds and Matthew gives us the wise men; though, even there, Matthew's gospel implies that the wise men arrived up to two years after the birth given that Herod orders a pogrom on children of two years and under.

The Acts of the Apostle was often presented as 'part 2' of an account by the Luke who travels with Paul in his pioneering mission to the emerging Christian communities that Paul, inspires and supports.

At one time it was thought that Paul was responsible for most of the letters included in the New Testament but it is now accept by most scholars that:

Paul wrote:

- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- 1 Corinthians
- Philemon
- Philippians
- 2 Corinthians
- Romans

With the corollary that Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and Colossians were written by people attempting the style of Paul. In fact my own father makes caustic comment on the writer of Ephesians as being unlike Paul in not being capable of constructing a logical argument.

Hebrews, Peter, James & John have always been treated as non Pauline.

Revelation is the book in the New Testament that few understand. It is part of the canon of biblical literature we know as 'apocalyptic' (describing or prophesying the complete destruction of the world) and along with Daniel in the Old Testament seems poetic rather than grounded in human reality.

There was an ongoing debate in the first few hundred years about which books should be included in the canon of the New Testament but there is agreement today across all the different denominations on the 27 books now included: the eastern Orthodox church ratifying the canon in 692 CE; the western Catholic church ratifying in 382 CE & reaffirming it in 1545 CE; the Anglican church recognising the canon in 1563 CE; and the Calvinist churches recognising the canon in 1647 CE. Wikipedia's 'Development of the New Testament Canon' is accurate and is a good place to start.

In summary, if we are trying fully to tease out the various elements concerning Jesus within the New Testament we need to understand that we see Jesus through four dominant accounts in the Bible and at least two minor accounts:

- Peter's memories, as recorded by Mark, as the basis of Matthew's, Luke's and his own gospel.

- The message of Jesus through his teachings as recorded by the figure we know as Q in Matthew's & Luke's gospels.
- Memories attributed to John, maybe written or maybe not by John the apostle.
- And then finally we see the figure of Jesus through the letters of Paul that are ABOUT him.
- Additionally we have small fragments about the myth of Jesus concerning his birth from Matthew & Luke;
- And we have finally a collection of letters either written in an attempt to mirror the style of Paul or by notable figures from the earlier Christian community.

As such, unless we adopt the early 20C 'cartoon' fundamentalist approach of God dictating the individual words of each and every document in the Bible, we have to accept that the records of and about Jesus are a patchwork quilt of accounts all required to give us the pattern that has come down through the ages. It is even possible that the differing accounts cloak real discord about what is being taught qv.

CHAPTER 6 – WHAT JESUS ACTUALLY PREACHED & WHY

Leaving aside conspiracy theorists and the Da Vinci code, if you try and take yourself outside the bubble of 'insider' Christian thought there is an homogenised message in the New Testament whose elements rarely seem to conflict because we treat those conflicting elements as complimentary rather than conflicting. The homogenisation is between the message preached by Jesus that we see in the synoptic gospels, with the base mission provided in Mark and the base teachings provided by Q, and the message preached about Jesus in the letters written by Paul - putting aside John's gospel for the moment.

Whilst all these accounts/letters are being thought about, composed and written, communities of 'the way' are trying to live in a way that Jesus' early followers set out upon; and besides, following his words, everyone was expecting Jesus' return imminently. The competing emphases in the differing accounts are entirely understandable when you view the New Testament as an organic, evolving record. It is possible that the centuries since have cloaked 'small p' political differences between emerging camps of followers. We know we have an account of strong differences between the Jerusalem community led by Peter and by James the brother of Jesus on the one side and the approach taken by Paul on the other, as to circumcision. One wonders however whether there might not also have been an underlying discomfort between the approaches in particular of Paul and Peter as to the base message.

In the first chapter of letter to the Galatians Paul certainly makes a point of saying that the gospel he proclaimed was revealed to him and that he did not receive it from any human source. In essence he is proclaiming parity with the other apostles; and as we have already discussed his message is all about what Jesus WAS.

In comparison, as referred to above the early Christian historian Eusebius (260/265 – 339 CE) records Papias (60 – 130 CE) writing around 95 – 110 CE, quoting John the Elder, as saying:

“...Mark, in his capacity as Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately as many things as he recalled from memory—though not in an ordered form—of the things either said or done by the Lord. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but later, as I said, Peter, who used to give his teachings in the form of chreiai, but had no intention of providing an ordered arrangement of the logia of the Lord. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down some individual items just as he related them from memory. For he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything...”

There are two logical deductions from this. The first is well known amongst those who have read widely and that is that the chronology provided within Mark, and therefore as previously discussed, within all three synoptic gospels, cannot be relied upon since everything Galilee is grouped at the beginning and everything Judea is grouped at the end.

The second has not, to my limited knowledge, ever been remarked upon: and it is that if Mark is faithfully recording Peter's teachings of a Galilean mission of Jesus teaching the Kingdom of God then already we have a pronounced disparity between what Peter and Paul are teaching their followers.

Peter and the mysterious figure Q – and it's not quite as simple as that but for the moment it will stand – record a healing mission and show Jesus preaching the Kingdom of God based on Love, of the selfless, self giving sort defined by the Greek word 'agape'. The Kingdom of God is the defining theme within the gospel of Jesus. If Mark's gospel is based on Peter's teaching it is plain that Peter is preaching the gospel OF Jesus whereas Paul is preaching a gospel ABOUT Jesus.

Before getting on to this core message of the Kingdom of God we will look briefly at John's gospel – the third main strand. The traditional view of John is that the Greek is too educated and the theology too developed for it to be the product of a simple Galilean fisherman such as the traditional identification with the 'disciple that Jesus loved'; and we discussed John A T Robinson's theory revealed in his book *The Priority Of John* in the previous chapter. Just to add to that though, let us postulate a scenario where a young John and James are being trained up to take over their father Zebedee's business and as such are both educated to a higher level than the, quote unquote, simple fishermen like Simon Peter (who we refer to as Peter) who working their own boats. As such James & John are the sons of a man who has made the move up the entrepreneurial chain. So when

they are recorded as being in Galilee we are seeing see them on their 'industrial experience' so to speak; and when in Jerusalem they're learning the ropes of the commercial side of the business. This could be why they have access to the High Priest's house on the day of Jesus' arrest - through the tradesman' entrance. It also leads to a plausible scenario where their mother asks for exalted positions for them, as a family on the move – something no mother of fully mature men would surely ever ask. It possibly leads to a life spent amongst the more cultured elements of Jewish society. It helps explain the better Greek and the more subtle theological thought; and finally it COULD lead to a drift away from the direct message being preached by Peter into wondering what Jesus WAS in a similar vein to the thoughts of Paul.

This is course 'merely postulating' and 'further adding' to a fascinating argument that 'renowned Johannine scholar' John A T Robinson expounds in his *The Priority of John*. If you can get hold of an 'out of print' copy it answers all of the traditional reason why the gospel could NOT have been written by the disciple that Jesus loved, i.e. John, even as it does no more than ask you to leave yourself open to that possibility.

Coming back to the four gospels, we have the structure of healing and the Kingdom of God provided in Mark's gospel, we get the fundamental teaching provided by Q in Matthew & Luke's gospel and we get an accurate chronology and yet more colour, particularly around the happenings whenever Jesus goes to Jerusalem, in John.

The situation we conventionally read into the gospel accounts of Jesus' missions is one where there is a muted simmering discontent, both against the Jewish law and against the Roman occupation, almost like the attitude of elements of English people leading up to Brexit (English as opposed to British). Very clearly the discontent is presented at a lower level than what transpired in France Revolution in 1789 or the Russian Revolution in 1917. Arguably however we are conditioned into thinking this by being 'inside the bubble' of traditional Christian thought.

Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* and Giles Fraser's *Chosen* give a very different scenario from outside the traditional 'take' on Jewish law; and from these you either see a convenient way of 'keeping to the way' or a set of rules that were a clear minority position within Pharisaic Judaism. Critically Kurt Struckmeyer's *A Conspiracy of Love* and his *People Of The Way* paint a significantly removed picture on the social conditions amongst the agricultural lower classes: where peasant farmers are being disposed of land in order to form more highly productive and profitable combines to fund imperial taxes. Struckmeyer illustrates a febrile, revolutionary situation, just about to explode, and suggests that THIS is the scenario into which, first John the Baptist (John B from now on) emerges with his apocalyptic warnings and then Jesus takes up his mantle with an alternative message of 'ground-up' transformation. In fact John's model of an 'angry judge' compared to Jesus' description of a compassionate and loving father gives us one of the three bases of his mission.

Struckmeyer describes John the Baptist's message, in a real live context, as one of God being angry with the way the ordinary people of Israel were being treated:

“Peasants were losing their land. Poor people were going hungry. They were suffering from illness and deprivation, and many were without adequate clothing. People were not helping each other in the face of desperate circumstances. Individuals were left on their own to suffer from an oppressive and unjust system. They were desperate and on the verge of rebellion against the wealthy elites and the Roman empire.”

In this reading of the situation:

“John warned that God would intervene in history to condemn and destroy Israel”...“through a foreign agent – the empire of Rome and Roman legions – just as God had done centuries earlier to Israel and Judah with the armies of Assyria and Babylon”...“John employed the metaphor of a prophet”...“A prophesy is not a prediction; it is a warning or promise”.

Putting the chronology, the colour and the Jerusalem details we have from John together with the base ‘Galilean centric’ message we have from Mark/Peter we are left with a scenario where Jesus branches off from his mentor, John B, towards the end of the John B's ministry; he sets out as a fire & brimstone preacher in a similar vein to his mentor, overturning the money lenders tables in the temple; retreats

to rethink his message in the wilderness; comes up with a socially radical message that aims to achieve the Kingdom of God by a 'ground up' transformational message; which he starts 'back up in the north', in his home area of Galilee; and in the course of his rethink he comes to, or solidifies, his understanding of God as a compassionate and nurturing father in contrast to John B's model of God as an angry judge.

THIS view of Jesus is going back to basics, before the Greek trinitarian models that have Jesus as God, and present him more in the view of a Ghandi or a Martin Luther King. This is not a downgrading of Jesus from God to man but rather sets a real life Jesus in a plausible historical context. What we have in this eminently plausible scenario is a real, living Jesus confronting an actual situation with a radical transformational approach with a way of living in 1C Palestine. Extrapolating from that view of Jesus we might come to the conclusion that his transformational approach helps us become fully human; and, borrowing from Chapter 20 and a discussion of our models of God, helps make God's Dream come true.

CHAPTER 7 - CRITICAL MISTRANSLATIONS of NEW TESTAMENT WORDS

WORD OF GOD

There are a very small number of critical, key words we read regularly in the New Testament where the meaning of the translated word is either inaccurate or misunderstood and for which a correct understanding is critical. The first two are references to 'Word' & 'Wisdom'. As Judaism developed either side of the Babylonian captivity the God of the Hebrews became ever more remote and as a result intermediaries were introduced to act as "God's arm on earth". In the 3C BCE Greek Septuagint translation of the Bible most freely available both to Jews at the time of Jesus, and to the early Jewish sect following 'the Christ', the two entities filling that gap were Logos & Sophia which we translate as Word & Wisdom:

Quite early after Jesus' death, in the letters of Paul, there is identification of Jesus as the Word of God – his representative on earth; however, Greek is a subtle and nuanced language and the word 'Logos' means different things according to context. At its most basic it means 'words'. In Greek philosophical thought it also means the underlying principles of logic and reasoning in the world; and, as discussed, to the Jews in the Hellenistic world it meant 'the arm of God'. All of which leads to misunderstandings:

Firstly the Word of God is NOT the bible. The 'Word' in the sense used in the New Testament is Jesus.

When John says 'the Word was with God and the Word was God' in chapter 1 of his gospel he was being clever in using a word which meant subtly different things to the two communities he was writing for – the Jewish sect following Jesus and the new emerging Greek thinkers formative in the gentile Christian community.

Quite early on there is also an identification of the Wisdom (Sofia) with the Holy Spirit.

FAITH & BELIEF

More contentiously, because it is incredibly hard for most Christians to accept the errors in what they have grown up with, the words translated as 'belief' & 'faith' in the New testament are also absolutely misunderstood; and this is not opinion or perspective but rather a strict matter of translation. Whenever the words 'belief' and 'faith' are used they are always a translation of the Greek noun 'pistis' and the Greek verb 'pisteous'. At the time those words meant to have commitment and loyalty. So when Jesus says 'believe in me', although he was speaking Aramaic, his words were rendered into Greek text using a term that was understood absolutely. Again in 2 Corinthians - itself thought to be a collection of 5 letters that Paul wrote to the church he had

founded in Corinth, and as described by Karen Armstrong, Paul was dealing with the issue of influential people round the city who were gaining 'mafia clan' like influence over followers - Paul uses the words 'pistis' and 'pisteous' to describe the commitment & loyalty they expected from people for services rendered.

The misunderstanding occurs when the original Greek documents were first being translated into Latin. There was no Latin word equating to the verb Pistious and so Jerome used the Latin word 'fideles' (faithfulness) for the noun and 'credo' ('from the heart') for the verb; but the understanding of 'faith' in its modern, conceptual sense did not come about until the 18C. Whenever people preach on faith and belief, and attribute them to Jesus and Paul in the modern 'conceptual' sense they are wrong.

Moreover Pistious CANNOT mean faith in the conceptual/intellectual sense we use the word today because the Jews had no interest in what you thought. They were interested in commitment to a message. Jesus and Paul remember were both talking or writing as Jews.

In fact Christianity is the only belief system (modern sense of belief) where you have to assent to a set of creeds or dogmas to be 'on the inside'. None of the other major faiths ever adopted this pattern.

Interestingly, and critically, one of the phrases driving the Protestant movement as it split from Catholicism was 'justification by faith' as opposed to 'justification by good works' – good works as a way of paying your way out of purgatory by employing someone to say prayers for you or by feeding the poor for example. In fact the original Greek words mean being justified by commitment & loyalty to the mission of Jesus (faith) rather than by keeping to the Jewish law (mistranslated as 'good works'). Arguably the position of Luther and the important Protestant reformers were opposite to that which they intended.

REPENTENCE

Another word that has been misunderstood is 'repentance'. The Greek means 'change of heart' or 'change of mind': and I would argue that it's clearly aimed at thinking about God in a different way and acting accordingly. In this correctly revised sense it is one of the major, consistent strands in Jesus' ministry – the first is 'love', the second is a socially just 'Kingdom of God', the third is transformative attitude to the world and the fourth 'thinking about God differently'; and given Jesus continual references to God as 'my father' and 'Abba' (which means 'daddy' rather than 'father') the essence of the word 'repentance' HAS to be that we think of God as a beloved father rather than a stern, remote judge or head of house. The word repentance does NOT mean regret & abasement for sins acknowledged in the way it has been taken for much of Christian history.

PART 2 - CHRISTIAN BELIEF PRACTICE & DISPUTE

This chapter attempts to give some of the basics of what we take as Christian belief for someone with no background whatsoever in the church. It attempts to present some of the different perspectives within Christianity. It gives the background for the major Christian festivals as well as covering those major splits within Christianity that give us the current set of denominations.

CHAPTER 8 - ESSENCE of JESUS' LIFE & MISSION

As discussed in the introduction you can take the essence of Jesus' life, mission, death & resurrection down to four conclusions:

- 'God is': there is a God so life has meaning.
- 'God is as we see in Jesus': we see God, or the nature of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
- 'God is love': the nature or essence of God is love.
- There is some form of existence after death.

Anything and everything else is/are human constructs or explanations which mean something to some people but not for all and are therefore up for debate and discussion.

One issue not often discussed is what Jesus thought about himself; but then he was a Jew and the Jews were & are not interested in the mechanism involved in explaining the substance of God. He clearly regarded himself as significant and frequently used the terms 'father' and 'son'; but later doctrines such as the trinity are human constructs attempting to lay out a mechanism for his relationship to God. As such they became the plaything of Greek philosophers and theologians for 400 years after the death of Jesus and then for theologians across the Christian spectrum for a further 1500 years.

Arguably the best definition I have ever seen however is the simple statement that “God IS and God is as he is in Jesus’; and this understanding of the God we see in Jesus, is unaffected by whether Jesus is transformation figure in a spiritual sense or with a social transformation understanding.

What is crystal clear from the gospels accounts is that Jesus preached the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven in Matthews - see earlier). He preached thinking about God as father in different way; and he did NOT preach a message involving sin in any way other than to give a reason for someone having been healed. Nor can any of his words be taken to imply salvation or atonement in any way, shape or form. There are no other conclusions open after reading the direct words attributed to Jesus.

CHAPTER 9 - PERSPECTIVES WITHIN CHRISTIANITY

Here in Western Europe, after the Protestant churches seceded from the original western, Catholic church, the remains became the Roman Catholic church and that takes as its ultimate authority the church and its traditions. The reformed Protestant churches give sole authority to the bible. The Anglican Protestant tradition balances both. All three traditions however give us problems when a tradition is shown to be dubious or fallacious or if there's a biblical mistranslation that later becomes known: most Christians, and in fact most religious people, seems to be conservative and resistant to change. In itself this is arguably ironic in view of the radical nature of Jesus' teaching. Taking anything as the ultimate authority needs to be re-examined, however, when that tradition is mistaken or is the result of a tradition based on a mistranslation, whether divinely inspired or of human origin'.

In addition to differing traditions one encounters differing generalised approaches to the bible and to Christian theology.

The conservative evangelical viewpoint certainly used to take the default position that whatever is written has credibility and is the basis for further discussion. The conservative evangelical viewpoint now seems to eschew critical doubt and its perspective can seem like a fundamentalist attitude; and unless people are actively exposed to alternative ideas this can often default to a cartoon like fundamentalism.

True Fundamentalism, where every word of the bible is taken as fact in every little detail, is a very recent movement. It came from the USA in the 1920s as a reaction to the teaching of 'evolution' in classrooms; and it follows a pattern through Christian history, and in fact a pattern in the history of other religions, where a fast changing world leads people to take 'hard & fast' stances on different topics. The infallibility of the Papacy, for instance, came into being after the turmoil of the formation of Italy in the mid 19C. In these situations people feel the need to grasp certainties but they then forget over time why they took hold of the position so the motivation is forgotten leaving just the certainty.

To conservatives 'liberal' is often used as a pejorative term but the term 'liberal' really just indicates a spectrum of people who are more open to changes in thinking. One issue for a conservative thinker is that liberal thought shies away from hard and fast beliefs and they (conservatives) see it as a set of nebulous concepts that mean very little. To someone of the liberal side of thought however conservative thinking can be seen as cartoon like.

A liberal thinker is most likely to be a humanist in the late 15/early 16C meaning of the word, wanting to understand the thoughts represented in the bible in the context and language of the time. So, with respect to the bible a liberal Christian humanist would be

concerned with what the meaning and context of a word or phrase meant in the original language/culture in which it was written – as so to a lesser extent would it be to a moderate conservative from 60 years ago – whereas a conservative evangelical is now more like to take the attitude that God was involved in putting the English words into position and that any changes in understanding are suspicious.

A radical thinker is to the left of liberal in the same way that fundamentalist is to the right of conservative. As a brief reflection, the more one thinks and studies with an open mind the more likely one is to abandon hard & fast beliefs. Interestingly some of the liberal thinkers I know are from High Church Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism where they can focus on the practical aspects of Christianity whilst letting their minds float more freely.

Kurt Struckmeyer in his *Conspiracy of Love* highlights another set of opposing perspectives. Quoting Marcus Borg and his *The Heart of Christianity* we are presented with two different visions of Christianity. Borg calls them paradigms but we might call them conservative Christianity and liberal Christianity; or traditional and progressive Christianity.

The first views the Bible as the unique revelation of God, emphasizes its literal meaning, and sees the Christian life as centered in believing now for the sake of salvation later. Believing in God, the Bible, and Jesus

as the way to heaven. Typically, it has also seen Christianity as the only true religion.

The second sees the Christian life as a life of relationship and transformation. Being Christian is not about meeting requirements for a future reward in an afterlife, and not very much about believing. Rather, the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present.

Putting to one side for the moment the issue of what the unknowable God is like – and for a brief discussion on that look up the chapter on An Alternative 21C Model of God – almost all the possible readings of Christian belief (and the word ‘almost’ provides a caveat) accept that in Jesus of Nazareth we see God; and fundamentally that is what the phrase the Son of God meant when it was first used. In fact that meaning is in some way MORE than the meanings attributed to previous recipients of that designation such as king David; however, for his followers ‘Son of God’ meant that in Jesus we see God – which is exactly what he claimed in the two, arguably, ‘prime’ eye witness accounts we have. Therefore whatever the degree of spiritual versus social bias you read into the action of Jesus it is clear how a God ‘out there’, ‘in here’, ‘outside time’ or the fundamental basis of the universe, would want us to behave in any given situation. Which of course makes the extremes pole of a socially conservative and ‘spiritually only’ perspective of God incredibly hard to understand. It just isn’t there in the accounts of Jesus’ mission, death & resurrected existence.

CHAPTER 10 - CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS

Of the major festivals Easter is clearly the most important festival in the Christian world. Leaving aside the issue of when Pentecost developed on from the Jewish festival it is derived from, the next important festival to be developed was Epiphany. The Egyptian church appropriated the midwinter date of the annual rebirth of the Egyptian sun god in the Egyptian calendar and used it to commemorate the unveiling to the world of Jesus at his baptism – and threw in the birth of Jesus along with it for good measure. Only later, as part of the Bishop of Rome's (later to be known as the Pope) mission to take control of Christianity, did the western half of the church (later known as Catholic) appropriate European, pagan, midwinter festivals and use it to celebrate the birth of Christ. Up until that this Christianity had shown very little interest in the birth of Jesus. It was at THIS point that the Western church also redefined the East's Epiphany as being represented by the arrival of the Magi or Wise Men. Technically the Protestant churches follow the Orthodox (Eastern) church pattern of celebrating the baptism of Christ at Epiphany even though, culturally, it has become associated with the three Wise Men (Kings).

CHAPTER 11 - CHRISTIAN DISPUTE

Most of the theological disagreements in the early centuries following the death of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know as the Christ, concerned the mechanism of his humanity, his divinity and the structure of divinity itself. These were the playthings of the Greek philosophers & theologians who dominated Christian thought; and the heresies of Montanism, Gnosticism, Donatism, Marcionism, Monophysitism, Manichaeism, Catharism are but to name a few. The two biggest councils to resolve doctrinal issues in Christianity were held at:

Nicaea in 325 CE where the current model we use of God as Father, Son & Holy Spirit was first accepted and where the relationship between the three was formalised (later amended 381CE), leading to the Nicene creed, which is the only creed accepted by all the leading Christian denominations.

Chalcedon in 451 CE where the issue of Jesus Christ's humanity and his divinity were the subject of intense debate. The final answer being that his nature was both fully divine and fully human.

Then there are the major political splits which have occurred for a number of reasons: predominantly the result of different Christian practices, of political 'land grabs' and the result of corruption in the western Catholic church:

The western and eastern halves of the church – Catholic and Orthodox – separated mostly because of the head of the Catholic (Roman) church, the Bishop of Rome aka the Pope, claimed hegemony over the church as a whole, based on his supposedly being the heir of St Peter; however, it was triggered by a small unilateral change to the Nicene creed in the Catholic church AFTER the creed had been formally adopted at Constantinople (381CE). The Orthodox churches (and Scottish Episcopal church) still say the original words whereas the Catholic church (Roman Catholic now and that also means some of the Protestant churches, such as the Church of England, which were derived from the Catholic tradition) unilaterally added extra words to say that ‘the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father AND THE SON’ rather than the original ‘...from the Father...’. Known as the Filioque clause this was the prima facie issue on which the east and west formally split in 1054.

Between the times of the Catholic & Orthodox split in the 11C and the Protestant reformation in the 16C one other revolt against corruption in the medieval western church is of particular note. The Cathar communities in the 12/13C took a dualist stance – something fairly common in the first 1000 years of Christianity – where there is a good God and a bad God and a higher neutral God; however their prime focus was as a peace loving sect based on humility. Catharism was finally broken by the only crusade ever launched against Christians and it was broken using brutal and inhumane tactics such as burning a church full of

people with the attitude that 'God will know his own when they get to heaven/hell'. The full details of the Cathar crusade, part colonial land grab from the northern part of the French kingdom and part the papacy crushing dissent at its own corruption, are sickening in the extreme.

The last of the major splits is known as the Protestant reformation but in fact there were precursors to it 100 years earlier with the Lollards in England and the Hussites in Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic) reacting against corruption in the Catholic church.

The split of the Protestant churches from Catholicism during the Reformation was in part yet again a reaction against corruption; in part it was the result of the original Greek bible texts becoming available in the west after they were shipped out before the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE, at which point the Church's jealously kept teachings of New Testament texts were sometimes found to be distorted; and in part it was the result of the invention of the printing press which widened access to the printed word across the European world. Broadly speaking Protestant churches are divided into the various Reformed churches, which abandoned the episcopal systems of Bishops, and the Lutheran & Anglican churches, which are more of a compromise and both retained the Apostolic system (claiming a laying on of hands when consecrating Bishops in an

unbroken chain going back to Peter). There ARE theological differences between some of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church but not as many as you think, and not many between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. What theological differences DO exist between the RC & Anglican Church of England (CofE) are based around 19C doctrines such as the Infallibility of the Papacy and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There have in fact been several movements within Anglicanism seeing themselves as fundamentally Catholic in nature and thinking themselves to be more RC than anything else but the CofE's founding 39 articles list impeccable Protestant doctrine.

For the British, the era of the England Civil war led to what would previously have been the Puritan wing of the Anglican Church of England splitting away to form the non-conformist denominations and a Presbyterian church (all now amalgamated as the United Reform Church) and the Baptist church. The Church of Scotland was and is Presbyterian.

The final split for British churches comes when the Methodist movement splits away from the CofE in the Evangelical revival of the late 18C to early 19C. Being the last split from the CofE partly explains why some elements such as the words of the respective communion services are so similar.

PART 3 - IN ADDITION SOME POINTS of INTEREST

Next we move on to some of the questions which someone from outside the 'Christian bubble' either might or should ask.

CHAPTER 12 - THE TRINITY (MORE)

Amongst the further points of interest that may interest a questioning soul are those that follow. One can argue that most, maybe all, are only of intellectual interest; and that none should affect the fundamental aspects of Christian life & mission; but they ARE important in understanding how we got to where we are today and they DO merit consideration 'down the line'.

The recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as 'Son of God' was an instinctive 'all embracing' and 'whole hearted' recognition by the people around him that he was to God as a son was to his father. After his death & resurrection Christians - the early Jewish followers of Jesus and then later, in particular, Greek thinkers - started trying to work out a mechanism for Jesus Christ's relationship with God. Defining God as Father, Son & Holy Spirit came late into the game and it was just one of several models that attempted to explain the inexplicable. The idea itself first developed in the late 2C and when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, legalised Christianity for political reasons in 313 CE, and then after Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire in 380 CE, any further thought was 'frozen in time'. Christianity had stopped being an 'outsider' insurgent faith and became institutionalised. The trouble is that for us is that whilst The Trinity was suitable for the mind of Greek philosophers it sounds like a fairy story to the ordinary person in the street and certainly causes theological problems relating to the other faiths who believe in the 'one God'. In fact all of the multiple models & definitions

mean/meant the same thing: that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see the nature of God: again “God IS and God is as he is in Jesus”. Arguably that is all that matters.

To understand how we arrived with The Trinity as a concept we have to go back to the Judaism into which Jesus was born and understand the environment in which Christianity developed.

To recap, remember, in the four accounts we have of Jesus’ ministry there are three strands of material: Peter’s memories of incidents and exchanges during a two year mission as written down by Mark; and a second strand coming from John’s memories. The third element are the parables which record the big scale sermons which pad out Mark in Matthew & Luke but they don’t involve Jesus talking about himself. Peter only remembers Jesus talking about himself as ‘The Son’ and the ‘Son of Man’ whereas John remembers a richer variety – the good shepherd, the bread of life, the light of the world, the way the truth & the life – and there are plausible reasons for that. In neither is there an explicit claim however and in all the accounts Jesus describes himself poetically rather than anything else. We don’t know why. Maybe he was still working it out; maybe he was just careful about lighting the fuse too early, maybe he didn’t want to put people off with outlandish claims or maybe the poetic references conveyed his own understanding that he was ‘of God’ in a way better than an actual description does? Occasional quotes such as “For God so loved the

world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” etc are comment from the author rather than quotes. They cannot have been Jesus’ direct teaching: not unless he favoured a passing stranger with a much more direct claim than he did his close disciples.

The start of the evolution wherein Jesus comes to be accepted as the Son of God is seen in the later days of Jesus’ ministry; and the Johannine scholar, Dr John Robinson, believes that when the author of John’s gospel uses the idea of the Son (along with Word & Logos in chapter 1) he is describing the relationship between Jesus and God i.e. as a son is to a father. For Greek thinkers developing early theology (and remember that as Jews the very earliest followers of Jesus were not interested in the mechanism by which he was accorded the acclamation ‘son of God’) the phrase The Son of God demanded a divine intervention in the procreation of Jesus; however, other than when discussing the mechanism of Jesus’ divinity it doesn’t actually matter. It is absolutely clear from the parable of the Wicked Tenants in Matthew that Jesus claimed a unique relationship with the God whom he called ‘his Father’.

Jesus died in 30 or 33 CE. The gospels are conventionally dated in a spectrum between 70 to 90 CE, although as discussed John AT Robinson’s inherently plausible approach dates them earlier (40 to 60 CE), whilst the letters of Paul particularly are from

the period between 50 & 60 CE. The gospels are a formalisation of what must have been passing around by word of mouth about the ministry of the man Jesus who had been acclaimed as 'Christ'. The letters of Paul and other writers are specific communiques to the early communities of believers encouraging them, dealing with practical problems emerging within them and fleshing out what the faith meant in practice. What came next however was a consequence of a number of factors:

- The location of Palestine within the Hellenistic (Greek influenced) Eastern Mediterranean world conquered by Alexander the Great.
- The pre-eminence of Greek thoughts within the Roman empire.
- The fact that Judaism was also highly thought of within the empire.
- The missionary efforts of Paul.
- The Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle that, both so influenced the empire and were very different to the ideas of the Jews.

In this scenario there was inevitably a cross fertilisation of ideas. So after the initial enthusiasm of Jesus' message had worn off the new Christians had a question: what did understanding Jesus as the Son of God actually mean? Over those first 300 years we see a variety of idea about exactly what Jesus was, what the Holy Spirit was and about how they related to God.

For the very start of this process we have to go back to the time when the Hebrews had split into two Kingdoms. The larger, wealthier Kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrian empire in 722 BCE and the 10 tribes were carried off into slavery. In 586 BCE the elite of the remaining Hebrew Kingdom of Judah had been taken off into captivity as was standard practice by the Babylonians after Judah picked the wrong side in a fight between Babylon & Egypt. That inevitably brought more souls searching. During serial occasions in the history of the three big faiths – Judaism, Christianity & Islam – big shocks to a civilisation have resulted in major changes in theology – and we see the pattern replicating here. The Persians then conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE and reversed the previous pattern of exile; however, during the exile for the elite of Judah, and in particular the prophet known as Second Isaiah, probably influenced by monotheistic Zoroastrianism, in Babylon Yahweh had become the ONLY God rather than being the tribal god of the Hebrews and there was an amount of editing of the Torah – those first five books of what we call the Old Testament – to reflect it. As referred to earlier, just one of the small changes that comes out of this period is a split between talking about the essence of God and about his manifestation on earth. This is when references emerge to the Glory of God and later the Word of God (translated as Logos in Greek) and the Wisdom of God (Sophia in Greek); and these ideas evolve further such that Wisdom and Word mean God's blueprint on earth and God's arm on earth.

Critically, and as discussed before, the word Logos was also used entirely separately in Greek Philosophy to mean the principle of reason in Greek philosophy. So what John was doing in those first verses of his gospel – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” etc – was making sense of Jesus with this concept of ‘the blueprint of God’ in a way that appealed both to Jews and to Greeks. The fact is though that John, Paul and all the other writers accepted Jesus as ‘OF God’ but wouldn’t have seen him AS God. Theirs was a poetic understanding of Jesus as Son of God.

Over the next few hundred years theologians continued to try and define the unknowable; and the next big change comes around the end of 2C. We go from Theophilus of Antioch writing about God, Jesus as His Word (Logos) and the Holy Spirit as His Wisdom (Sophia) 150 years after the death of Jesus; to Tertullian (150 – 220 CE) who first uses the word ‘Trinity’ and who starts defining Father, Son & Holy Spirit as aspects, faces or masks of God at the turn of the century (Greek theatre had actors using masks to denote which character they were playing). We’ve now abandoned earlier poetic understandings of Father, Son & Holy Spirit and replaced them by attempts to DEFINE exactly what the fundamentals of the relationship are. Move forward another hundred years to 325 BC and you get to our Nicene creed as an attempt to end the debate about how what is now known as The Trinity relate to

each other, and this is the point where Constantine imposes a solution.

Interestingly one of the defining elements of Christianity is this fact of having to think in approved ways or risk being deemed a heretic and it isn't the case for any of the other big faiths.

It was only at the time of the Enlightenment towards the end of 17C that people started questioning again; but then throughout history people tend to reinvent God in the light of their own understanding of the world. As a civilisation that is no longer interested in metaphysics & philosophy in the way the Greeks were how can the changing ideas of God and of Jesus rationalized? Well if you take a step backwards you can see that the 4C ideas of the Trinity and the 1C ideas about Jesus as the Word of God actually mean the same. Both ends of an evolving 300 year timeline are attempts to describe the fact that: God IS; God is as he is in Jesus; and that the God we see revealed in Jesus is a God of Love; and both are consistent with the earlier emotional response to Jesus that saw his followers acclaiming him as 'Son of God'. In other words: that there is a 'creator entity' we call God and that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see everything we need to know about the nature of this God; and furthermore that as revealed in Jesus we have an active & interested God whose primary focus is Love. In other words FATHER, SON and HOLY SPIRIT.

CHAPTER 13 - GOD'S PLAN FOR US

We like to use the phrase “God’s plan for us” without thinking through the consequences. If we are acting out God’s plan then we have no free will. Moreover if we model God as a parent we have to recognise that a good parent doesn’t have a plan for their child but rather has an aspiration – or dream. A good parent’s dream is that their child has a fulfilled life; so in terms of God, he/she/it wants sentient species capable of living and relating to each other in a loving manner. The reality, therefore, of the relationship between the creator and man (the species) is ‘God’s Dream’ not ‘God’s Plan’. The caveat however revolves around the philosophy of a God outside time. A Creator/God has brought time into being along with matter and the universe. The result is that God can see the beginning, middle and end simultaneously, and in that sense God’s dream, hope, aspiration & plan all mean the same thing.

CHAPTER 14 - FACT OR FICTION: THE STORY OF JESUS

There is far more evidence that a man called Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in Palestine – dying in 30 or 33 CE – than there is of Julius Caesar coming to Britain 100 years before Rome annexed Britain. Caesar wrote the only report of his invasion himself. In contrast there are several independent accounts of Jesus and his followers.

Ignoring the fact of whether Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected after his death the evidence for his existence, his death and the movement which survived him is incontrovertible. One has to plead desperation and ignore the clear evidence which remains to deny his existence. Sixty years after Jesus' death the Roman-Jewish writer Josephus makes reference to "the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ" and also to the death of John the Baptist. The further point has been made by C.S. Lewis that to suggest the gospels were fiction was to invent the concept of the novel over a thousand years before we accept it to have first been seen. It takes imaginative contortions of imagination to deny the existence of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth who had SOME form of dramatic effect on the world around him. There are those who do perform such mental gymnastics which is why the clearest facts only have been presented; and no mention has been made of the gigantic movement spawned by the life, death & 'alleged' resurrection – which to any serious historian would indicate that SOMETHING significant happened.

CHAPTER 15 - HOW COULD JESUS BE BOTH HUMAN AND DIVINE

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE came up the philosophical & theological compromise that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. The net result was to cut off parts of the early church that disagreed, but ask yourself whether it really matters? All we need is to accept that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see the nature of God. If you need more then think of Jesus of Nazareth being subsumed into the presence/being of a 'God outside time' upon his death & resurrection. As part of a God outside time then he was part of God at the beginning, is part now and is part of God at the end to come.

A hardline evangelical or a fundamentalist will demand that a fully God-like Jesus was born as a man but with God-like omniscience and God-like powers – in other words God walking around in a man's body; however that was declared a heresy in the 4C after which the idea originally died; only to be resurrected in the 20C by people who do not understand their own history.

CHAPTER 16 - MARY MAGDALENE

Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute, the Eastern Orthodox tradition never recognised it and the 7C CE Pope, Gregory the Great, deliberately fudged unconnected incidents in the gospels in order to savage her reputation so as to make a point about 'mistranslated' repentance. In trashing the reputation of a woman who was as close to Jesus as any of his male disciples for his own misguided message you have to understand it as the product of deeply underlying misogyny as well as falling far below any decent standards of love, integrity or honesty. The facts are that Mary stood by Jesus when the men ran away and that she was the first to see the risen Jesus on the 'morning after'; and modern thinking is that she was of a higher social status and may even have helped support Jesus during his ministry. Whatever she was however her pivotal reputation has been degraded in a way that casts shame on those who did it and the truth needs to be trumpeted widely and repeatedly.

The Wikipedia entry on Mary Magdalene is accurate and uncontroversial and indeed Googling 'Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute' throws up numerous sites all telling the same thing: that Mary was probably a woman of higher status who supported Jesus in his ministry; that arguably she was as close as any disciple; that the myth of her being a prostitute was an amalgamation of her being named Mary, of Mary of Bethany washing Jesus' feet and of an unknown 'sinful woman' similarly washing his feet. Pope Gregory the Great made an example of Mary as a repentant sinner but given the total lack of anything other coincidence there has

to be the possibility that this gigantic error was more than merely an ignorant & incompetent mistake. The Roman Catholic church took the massive step of reversing its historical position on Mary in 1969 but popular culture persisted with the myth. In 2018 Pope Francis took the biggest step yet in creating a major feast day for her in line with the male apostles. The Orthodox communion has always recognised her importance and many of the Protestant churches disagreed with the then Roman Catholic church position. The blackening of her character for political reasons remains the thing she is known for however and that should not be tolerated. When the truth becomes something to be sacrificed in the light of political expediency you know that there's a rotten canker at the heart of your organisation.

CHAPTER 17 - THE CHURCH GOOD OR BAD?

With the loving example of Jesus in front of us we have to accept that much of what the various churches did through history was unmitigated evil. We make ourselves ridiculous if we try to defend the massacre of Jewish & Muslim men, women & children when the 1st crusade resulted in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099; or defend the burning of churches full of supposedly heretic Christian Cathars in southern France in the early 13C; both of which and many more were committed under a Christian banner, with leaders claiming a Christian motivation and being sanctified by the head of the Western church. With a less superstitious understanding we understand this as plain evil and a gross distortion of Jesus' teaching of the vilest kind. And yet, and yet, without some form of formal organisation it is hard to know what might have come down the ages to a time when it is clearer that Christians are at the heart of much of the good of the great 20C charities and disaster relief agencies. Perhaps we just have to accept the distortions done in the name of Jesus and work to make sure it doesn't happen again. It didn't have to have happened that way though; and we have to be clear that ordinary people, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim are capable of great kindness to each other. It is however at the institution set up to sustain and promulgate the message where criticism must be directed.

When the first crusade entered Jerusalem the description goes that the crusaders were wading knee deep in blood as they massacred the Muslim and

Jewish inhabitants. In the years after 9/11, when opinion in the West and in the US in particular was demonising Islam, Ridley Scott made a film called the Kingdom of Heaven; and however many factual inaccuracies there were in the film – and there were (!!!) – he was correct to conveying the words & actions of Saladin in recapturing Jerusalem from the nearly 100 year old crusader kingdom of Outremer in NOT permitting a massacre in reprisal. In the film Saladin is given the words to the effect that “we will show them that we are better than that” – a fair rendering of what is known to have been said.

It is easy to put these horrific and barbaric actions down to a superstitious and barbaric time in history; however we are talking about a time when the actions of the church took the lead in misguided bigotry rather than mitigated its effect. In general throughout history Karen Armstrong in her ‘Fields of Blood’ makes a good case that fundamentally the sources of war are not religion and that religion tends to mitigate the worst effects of power politics; but the actions in the name of God in the medieval era, and at a time when learning & medicine flourished among the Muslims of the East, seem to have enhanced the barbarity of the era and they remain a stain throughout history.

Then again the Jews too suffered through repeated pogrom after pogrom throughout Europe; and one has to ask again and again “where was the love of God in any of the actions of the church then?”. The

counter may come that individual Christians probably responded kindly to each other, but then people at a local scale often do anyway. What was the organisation setup to promulgate the ministry of Jesus doing to tip the balance of human kind from the evil that men can do to the good which they can also do? The answer has to be 'very little' at best and 'absolutely nothing' at worst.

Unquestionably the great monastic orders preserved some of what was left of the Roman empire through dark times ahead and unquestionably they were influential in setting up the world as we know it. The questions needs to be asked though whether, had what they preserved not been available to the West, the world would necessarily have been a worse 'less loving' place?

Coming forward to the second half of 20C we see examples of both an ineffectual & irrelevant church: where small scale politics & infighting characterise local parishes; where numerous child based organisations have been found guilty of child abuse of the worst kind; and where recent memory is of the corrupt power exerted by parish priests rather than love (in Roman Catholic Ireland in particular). The question that needs to be asked here is of how COULD the loving nature of God as demonstrated by Jesus have been so distorted?

It is perhaps in the mass disaster relief agencies of the 20C, many of which were Christian based and most

of which were the product of a Christian centred world, that we see love being the primary function of Christian people rather than salvation with love as a side effect; and yes we have the example of the care of the Quakers in the 17C and one convent order in 15C Italy set up to minister for the poor which cannot be ignored, but we also have to understand just how far we as an organised faith have been from the example of Jesus throughout history.

There is however an “and yet” moment. To offer some balance and some defence for the faith I will turn to a more intensely personal style of writing and say that in my own experience those occasions where people have gone over and beyond the level of ordinary human kindness have tended to have a root somewhere in Christian faith; and of note, at one manufacturing company I managed it was little surprise to me when I found that those key individuals I trusted implicitly were active Christians. Going to a wider scale when one reads of individuals going over and above what might be expected I, personally, have often found a Christian element. I am not trying to argue that the good offsets the bad or that ‘going the extra mile’ is purely a Christian characteristic. All I am trying to do is offset some of the bad I have myself laid before you. The negative is ‘spilt milk’ now and that incredibly sour spilt milk should not stop us trying to getting back to what the example of Jesus of Nazareth means about our understanding of God. We need to recognise the good and stop the bad ever happening again. Oh and

perhaps be a little bit more humble before we throw mud at other faiths that might perhaps be going through an infinitely less dark period in their history.

CHAPTER 18 - MISC

PRAYER

Most Christians spend a lot of time in prayer and in many church services the prayers/intercessions can almost be another sermon; however, we need to remember Jesus' words – “do not pray as the Pharisees do, on street corners” – and also realise that ‘more’ words cannot make a difference to God. So for some the question comes “what is the point of prayer”? No one knows. Jesus doesn't say. There are many theories around but they are no more than that. Perhaps the reason is that, as the radical theologian Don Cupitt wrote, somehow it seems a worthwhile thing to do. Or perhaps it is a way of ‘keying yourself into the God mentality’ and as such it is A (rather than THE) way of keeping the ‘Christian thought’ part of your brain active.

DOUBT IS HEALTHY

Doubt can mean different things. Intellectual doubt leads us to question and gain a better understanding of something. Emotional doubt helps stop us being quite so definitive in our views and helps us to tolerate peoples of views we might not share. A healthy dollop of doubt might have stopped our brothers, sisters & forebears from causing quite as much damage/hurt/evil to their fellows in the name of God down the ages.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND WHY IT DOESN'T MATTER

Reference to a virgin birth came about when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek between in the early 3C BCE (known as the Septuagint). The Septuagint translated what modern, more authoritative versions translate as “young woman” in Isiah’s critical passage as “a virgin”. It doesn’t actually matter. Neither of the two prime eye witness gospels are interested in Jesus’ birth (Peter’s memories as recorded by Mark and the tradition of John). For them it was his life, death and resurrection that mattered.

DO YOU HAVE TO GO TO CHURCH TO BE A CHRISTIAN

If Jesus wanted us to have loyalty to his ministry rather than believe in what he WAS then what we do out in the community around us matters far more than any medieval concept of worship. When people say “you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian” they are right; however most of us need SOME kind of discipline to keep you keyed into the Christian community. Perhaps THAT is the most important role for church services. For many there’s an emotional and psychological stimulus produced by attendance. For others though the old ‘monastic discipline’ approach is as relevant. Your approach is a product of your own psychological make up AND of the wing of the church you come from. Don’t think that you have to experience what anyone else feels about church services. All that matters is that you live a life that contributes to the Kingdom of God; and if you don’t then no amount of church attendance counts for anything.

THE CHURCH AS A PILOT LIGHT IN THE COMMUNITY

Thinking in modern terms, an admirable leader doesn't want worship but rather wants their 'people' to be happy & fulfilled; and this is very much in contrast to an Old Testament and Greek mythological view of God and gods where obeisance and worship were requisite. We ought therefore to wonder what the point of church services is; and if we question what the point of church services is then we next gravitate to pondering the justification for spending a lot of time & money keeping churches open. Perhaps the answer is that keeping small local village churches open means that there is a 'pilot light' maintained in the community. One that CAN spark something more if/when required. The corollary of that however is that the church community has to be sensitive and alert to the needs of the wider community; and also that church services are a means to an end rather than the end in itself. The final thought on the 'pilot light' idea is that for the great majority of the time it isn't needed; it is only in need that the pilot light ignites something bigger; and that we may find it frustrating to irrelevant for much of the time. Perhaps the only answer for that feeling of personal irrelevance is to go back to the mantra of letting every little thing you do contribute to the kingdom of God on the basis that sooner or later the balance will tip on any one issue – and that balance point may not be seen for many years to come.

PART 4 - ATONEMENT v LOVE

Pared down, there are very clearly two major strands within Christian thinking. The concept and practice of love were at the very core of Jesus' teaching. Expressed in the form of The Kingdom of God love IS the core of the Gospel of Jesus. In comparison the Gospel ABOUT Jesus as it mutated from Paul's thinking to that of Augustine's – after the nationalisation of the church by Constantine – has as its core the concept of atonement. For a large part of the Christian world atonement sits together with love in an uneasy duopoly to the extent that the dark crowds out the light. Arguably however it represents the 'Dark Side' of Christianity with an inward looking spirituality contradicting everything that Jesus stood for: presenting a vengeful view of God that is the opposite of what we see in Jesus and leaving the followers of Jesus with an inward selfish focus.

CHAPTER 19 - ATONEMENT THEORY: THE DARK SIDE OF CHRISTIANITY

As practicing Christians many/most of us attend regular church services. As such we either get desensitised to some of the concepts encountered and the stock phrases used or we wince at the ideas and move on. Having read what I have written so far the it is clear that I regard the Christian concept of sin as unhelpful, a distortion of Jesus' Jewish understanding and deeply distracting. Now, however, I want to go further and tackle what I consider to be a disturbing pit at the heart of accepted Christian belief – and I say that as a committed & practicing Christian with a fundamental loyalty & commitment to the idea of a loving God as seen Jesus.

One of the ideas most associated with Christian belief is this concept known as Atonement theory. It takes the very early belief amongst the followers of Jesus, that he died for 'our' sake – originally 'our' being the peoples of Israel and Judah rather than each individual personally; it further evolves when married with the ideas of Tertullian & Augustine's and the 2, 3 & 4C obsession with a deeply twisted - and strictly 'not of Jesus' - sense of personal sin; and it attempted to provide a mechanism to link the two. When you hear people talking about 'Jesus dying for your sins upon the cross' this is what they are talking about. Very few understand the barbaric mechanism used to explain exactly how the phrase makes sense; and, in a sense, the feeling that Jesus died for us is more of an emotional response than intellectual reaction; however letting it go unchallenged makes a mockery of Jesus' life and witness.

Simplistically, the very first of the formal mechanisms of how atonement occurred was developed 200 years after Jesus' death, in a very different environment from which the death of Jesus occurred – in the Greek thinking world. The next major theory occurs about 1000 years later and attempts to explain his death in an entirely different culture – the medieval world of knights and honour. For many the most popular, and sadly the most savage, occurs 1500 years after the death of Jesus, in a vastly changed world where the Western church was splitting at what we know as the Reformation and where a renewed emphasis on 'feeling' came into the church to supplant the rigid control of Catholicism. All of the various theories, 'speak' to people with very different ideas/cultures from those around Jesus at the time of his death, but sadly the ones that have stayed current until modern times are the most savage.

First, the second of those theories, the Satisfaction theory of Atonement, is based on a set of ideas unique to honour based fundamentals of formal, Western, medieval knighthood. As such and with an absolutely different mindset to it in the modern era it is irrelevant. The first and the third theory need to be explored because much of Christian thought and consideration is based on them.

The dominant early model of the atonement, known as Christus Victor, postulates that when Adam fell, in the Garden of Eden after eating the apple, his soul went into the realm of Satan; and therefore had to be ransomed out of hell by God sending his son to die.

The most popular model of atonement today is known as Penal Substitution. It postulates that God condemns ALL individual humans to death for their personal sins but that he sends his son as a sacrifice to die in the place of us.

Christus Victor comes about as the result of Greek theologians trying to find a way to explain the degrading death of a Roman political prisoner in such a manner to 'sell itself' to prosperous citizens of the empire: the message of Jesus already appealed to the lower classes of society and this was a way to make it seem acceptable to the middle and upper classes for whom the Kingdom of God was less personally advantageous. To us today it is little better than a cartoon. Granted, there is a possibility that, like the Satisfaction model of Atonement that displaced it, that it was an improvement of the ideas that went before; however, it is difficult to see how. Through most of Christian, Jewish & Hebrew history the creation story of Adam & Eve has been viewed as allegory. Pure fundamentalism is a late, early 20C reaction to the complexities of the modern world in the USA. Therefore Christus Victor is cartoon like theory based on cartoon imagery in a way that 'plugged the gap' in the thinking of the day.

As Karen Armstrong puts it in her *A History Of God* "Neither Jews, nor Greek Orthodox Christians regarded the fall of Adam in such a catastrophic light; nor, later, would Muslims adopt this dark theology of Original Sin. Unique to the West, the doctrine compounds the harsh portrait of God suggested earlier by the great theologian Tertullian."

Penal Substitution theory is even more pernicious however since it builds on Christus Victor, adds in very personal angst, and still reaches down, 500 years, through history. As such it maintains a malign influence that contradicts most of the advances in understanding affecting life as we know it. To get there you have to suspend belief and accept each and every step of this chain - to:

- Totally ignore the image and nature of God we see in the life, words & mission of Jesus.
- Ignore the fact that sin, for Jews, was 'failing' or 'missing the mark' and as such you apologised for it, or made recompense for it, and moved on.
- Absolutely misunderstand Paul and John when they talk about sins as being 'individual sins' rather than the 'sins of Israel in turning away from God' that they actually refer to.
- Misunderstand the fact that sacrifice for the Jews was often/usually a symbol act of 'sealing' or 'agreeing' rather than payment of a ransom.
- Ignore the fact that God ransoming Israel from the Egyptian and its escape from Egypt - with no element of transaction – is what Paul and the others came to as a benchmark.
- Accept that a cartoonlike Christus Victor type model has any iota of validity whatsoever in explaining why Jesus died.
- Absorb in its entirety the thinking of a brilliant but tortured man, Augustine of Hippo, living both at the demise of the civilisation in which he lived and at the angst ridden elements of his own personal

life, in coming up with such an evil & twisted theory of human sin.

- 'Cast a blind eye' to the use to which the Western, Catholic, church put that sense of universal sin – that of creating a vast money making machine that offset personal sin - and accepting it as in any way justifiable.
- Immerse yourself in the barbaric and bigoted civilisation that came out of Western Europe – it's of note that the far more advanced Eastern world of the Orthodox church never went in for these ideas as neither did the more educated Eastern world taken over by the early Arab, Muslim invaders.
- Accept the personality of the acerbic & driven publicist, Martin Luther, and his 'born again' conceptual leap as being stable and healthy when considering his explanation that the death of Jesus was to offset individual human failures.
- Understand that for good or ill the modern world has absorbed the intense, 'me me me' focus of the protestant world.
- Making it entirely plausible to see a stupid & schizophrenic God sending his son to make restitution for the failings of an evolved species; despite the example of the man who we believe to have shown us the nature of a loving God; and despite all the advances in the understanding of the world we live in, many of which came about as the result of Christian inspired thinking.

- Finally, ignoring the third leg of Jesus' message which in the Greek called for thinking about God in a different way but which has been rendered into English as repentance. The very words of Jesus in referring to 'his father' tell us the way that we are to think about God: as a parent; and no remotely decent parent condemns his/her child to death for minor infractions such as losing your temper. Remember that the sins most are called to ask for forgiveness for every Sunday are not capital crimes but simple human mistakes.

Sin and atonement are inextricably linked. The third 'horseman of the apocalypse' is salvation: salvation not as it is used in the benchmark of Moses leading the Hebrews in the escape from Egypt but rather as narrowed down to the very narrow meaning of 'salvation from your sins made possible by atonement'. Together they form an abhorrent picture of God that contradicts everything that we know about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, in whom we see God.

The very savagery of this barbaric idea ought to have had us dismissing it out of hand but somehow we allow abhorrent ideas to be accepted in a religious environment when we would not tolerate them within the rest of the society in which we live. We ought to be questioning these ideas straightaway in the light of the person of a loving Jesus. Instead, obsessed by sin, we have constructed a vengeful model of God which cannot be supported by the evidence. To repeat some of the points above:

- Jesus is not interested in sin except as a cover for healing.
- Jesus talks about laying down his life but makes no suggestion of dying for sins.
- Paul preaches a multitude of allegorical ideas, including sacrifice, for the Gentile communities in which he undertook his mission; and even within his own Jewish community sacrifice has a whole variety of connotations.
- When Paul & John play with ideas such as 'he died for sins' they mean the nation turning away from God rather than individual failings.
- It is an idea of sacrifice is similar to the commemoration of, and rooted in, Israel's escape from Egypt.
- There is absolutely no sense of a transaction (e.g. money or death as a ransom for sin) in the original Greek words & original culture/context.
- Atonement was originally the product of Greek philosopher theologians coming up with an mechanism for Jesus' death to replace the original, very general, acceptance that his dying was salvation for man.
- Atonement changes at the Reformation reflect a new emotional angst and it take on a new highly individualist perspective.
- Christ dying for the sins of the individual is a gross distortion and a total reversal from the universal love that Jesus preached.
- It is the product of the psychological angst of the writers.

- In a society where guilt and 'paying off' myriad sins had become a gigantic money making enterprise by the Catholic (and therefore Roman Catholic and Protestant) church.
- And it has found a new and hardline acceptance in highly individualist, 'modern day American' evangelical community.
- As such it rivals the false accusation of Mary Magdalene as a prostitution as an horrific travesty of the truth.
- It reverses everything Jesus stood for.

To accept Penal Substitution as an acceptable explanation for the death of Jesus you have to live under a veil of ignorance; you have to accept each and every step of a preposterous chain of events; and you have to ignore, totally and absolutely, the very example of he in whom we see God. Putting aside the issue of whether the Devil/Satan is an external force within Creation, or is alternatively a personalisation of the evil that humans do, accepting Penal Substitution theory, the Augustinian model of sin and therefore a need for personal Salvation, is as though the Satan has got into Christian belief and turned it around.

For various reasons, many of which may have been laudatory and advanced for the thinking of their day, the example of the loving God encapsulated in the person of Jesus of Nazareth has been twisted it on every level to resemble a harsh, inflexible Being that justifies the hell to which our fellow humans are subjected. Furthermore, the attitudes and action of this harsh, stupid, inflexible, abusive

& schizophrenic model of God chime so resolutely with all we claim to detest about human actions that we cannot be surprised if the world us thinks us ridiculous.

In fact in amongst the savage and – it should be argued – discreditable theories explaining Jesus' death there was/were other theories: notably Peter Abelard's 12C moral influence theory of atonement. It retains the 3/4/5C concept of personal sin which requires atoning for but replaced the human sacrifice element of atonement with Jesus' death being a demonstration of God's love which can change the hearts of sinners. It's considered that Abelard's theory is the one most liberals would assent to; and as a contrast to Christus Victor and to Penal Substitution theory it retains great merit. It does however rest on the flawed thinking of brilliant men thinking of theoretical solutions/situations which bear no resemblance to the thinking of Jesus.

Taking an even harder line position, liberal communities replace atonement with the need to be reconciled to God? Why and with what mechanism? Human beings are an evolved species. Individual selfishness and communal action are both parts of what has made us the species we are – a species made by the process of evolution. Why then do the faults our species have need reconciliation. Surely a parent would want to guide their child towards what they regard as a right way of thinking and acting rather than condemning them and needing the child to be reconciled with the parent? If we are to take Jesus' call for 'repentance' seriously (and remember that the Greek word actually means thinking about God in a different way) and take note of Jesus

calling God 'daddy' then we have to abandon totally atonement OR reconciliation.

It is at least arguable that the evil Christian organisations/governments through the centuries have done was sanctioned if not caused by the conceptual evil of Augustinian sin, atonement and salvation. The fact that the Christian behaviour of ordinary people is still good, at least at an aspirational level, even if Christian organisations/governments have been the very opposite throughout the last 2000 years, is possibly to do with mothers retelling, & subliminally teaching, Jesus' parables of love to their babies and young children. That observation by Tom Holland in 'Dominium: the Making of the Western Mind' is the missing link that starts to balance the evil done in Christ's name.

I could not complete my rejection of everything to do with the concept of atonement without quoting a far more elegant phrase from Franciscan friar Richard Rohr: "Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity; Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God".

If you listen to the words of Jesus' concerning the Kingdom of God they are about love, pure and simple. Whether you think of the Kingdom of God in the traditional 'aspirational' way in a land 'far far way' or whether you take Struckmeyer's approach that this was the core of Jesus' attempt at personal/societal transformation in 1C CE Palestine, it is clear that Jesus taught his followers that the Kingdom of God involved radical love, lavish generosity,

extravagant forgiveness, inclusive hospitality, compassionate action, selfless service & a passion for justice.

Finally, even when the original theory we know as Christus Victor was taking hold there were other ideas being postulated. Recapitulation theory, which was first clearly formulated by Irenaeus (122 – 202 CE) in the second century, saw Christ as the new Adam who succeeded where Adam failed. It might have a mythological aspect in our eyes today but at least it did not pander to the darkest side of angst ridden thinkers determined to bring hell down to earth just to show how much better the belief in Christ was.

CHAPTER 20 – JESUS TAUGHT LOVE

Jesus came in to a Judaism where the dominant strand of Pharisaic thought, led by Rabbi Hillel, was founded on Love and of treating others as you wanted to be treated yourself. Known as the 'Golden Rule' it is a strand of human thought coming out across peoples & civilisations across the world during the Axial age referred to earlier.

Jesus himself taught a message that is unarguably suffused with love. His dominant theme of the Kingdom of God is underpinned at each and every stage with love. When asked which the (one single) most important commandment is he responds with linking 'love the Lord your God' with 'love your neighbour as yourself'. The significance of these two being linked is that loving your neighbour is as important as loving God.

Love is the single most dominant theme of Jesus. The Kingdom of God breaks down what love looks like in human terms. Furthermore, the call to, what we call, repentance - and which actually means 'a change of mind', 'a change of thinking', 'a change of intention' or 'a change of mind' - comes to love also. That's it: pure and simple. Love is the central and most important factor that Jesus taught. Anything and everything which conflicts with it has to be doubted.

CHAPTER 21 - A CHANGE from LOVE to SIN & SALVATION

How then did a pattern of a commitment to the concept of a loving Kingdom of God turn so inward looking that belief in personal salvation & intellectual creeds and (for Evangelical Protestants) personal relationships with God all became more important than the loving acts required to propagate the Kingdom of God? To quote Kurt Struckmeyer's 'An Unorthodox Faith' and his 'People of the Way': "Jesus never intended to create a new religion of rites, creeds, and dogma that offered an eternal reward in heaven. Instead he announced the subversive arrival of the kingdom of God - a social and economic revolution of the heart based on a lifestyle of radical love, lavish generosity, extravagant forgiveness, inclusive hospitality, compassionate action, selfless service, a passion for justice, creative nonviolence, and simple living. He invited his followers to transform their lives and change the world"...the countercultural Jesus movement defied the social norms of the Roman Empire by creating alternative communities of shared life and goods in service to the poor. Jesus proclaimed an unconventional society that challenged systems of male domination, social inequality, economic disparity, and violence. This way of life defined Christianity for three hundred years until the emperor Constantine invited the church to help rule an empire, and its countercultural lifestyle was replaced by a dogmatic belief system."

Whether you account it as THE turning point, or alternatively a definitive bend in the road, THE issue, or the CRUX of the issue, was the legalisation of Christianity within

the Roman empire by the Emperor Constantine in 313 CE. Legalisation occurred only ten years after Emperor Diocletian (reigned 284 – 305 CE) had made the most significant attempt up until that time to stamp out the Christian sect. When Constantine took power he saw Christianity as something to unify the empire and he set up councils to come to agreement upon some of the major theological disputes at the time in order to solidify that unity. Whether deliberate or not the resulting Nicene creed, first adopted in 325 CE and then amended/ratified at Constantinople in 381 CE, eliminates any reference to the Kingdom of God or to the radical social agenda Jesus held, and instead turns Christian thought inwards to belief as we use it in the modern sense of intellectual faith rather than the ‘commitment & loyalty’ meaning of the Greek word ‘pisti’ which Jesus’ Aramaic was rendered into and which Paul used – particularly in the five letters to the church at Corinth that we know as 2 Corinthians.

Aligned with, and reinforcing this turning inward, is the likelihood that the legitimisation of Christianity promoted a move away from women ‘DOING love’ in the early church towards men ‘THINKING sin & theology’ as the church became a good career opportunity.

In one sense such an introspective thought process may be no more unique than the way the other great faiths emerged after the Axial Age; and certainly, as a result of the efforts of the 17C Quakers and of the 18/19C Evangelical revival in promoting loving changes & movements in society, we DID see society change for the better as a result of

personal introspection. A PURELY introspective path is such a major risk to Christian belief in that it is hard not to view a concentration on the 'inward' as the sole or prime focus as other than as a cosy, self-indulgent distraction to demonstrating commitment and loyalty to the message that Jesus preached.

Regardless of how 'we got here', what would seem self-evident is that, if we are to consider the words of Jesus as pre-eminent, the only point of the introspective thoughts of personal sin or salvation, or even of personal relationships with God, are to act as a driving force to further the Kingdom of God.

Ironically, those who hold most dearly to a sin, salvation & atonement understanding of Jesus' life and mission also hold to views that veer to Jesus being 'God walking on earth in a man's body. If such an unsubtle understanding of the creeds was, in fact, true then how is it that God got it so wrong in preaching love & forgiveness that multiple theologians, from Paul to Augustine, through Tertullian and the many others, were required to spend three hundred years correcting him/her/it?

The pernicious and borderline evil aspect of the threefold concept of sin, atonement & salvation is not purely that it turns inwards to a selfish 'me centred' aspect of Christian life, and ignore the outward facing nature of Jesus' mission, but that it promotes a savage view of God that undermines everything that Jesus came to live and teach.

CHAPTER 22 – IF NOT SALVATION THEN WHAT?

Despite Apollinarism (God walking round in a man's body) being recognised as a heresy 1600 years ago much of the Christian community regards Jesus as an omniscient and omnipotent God walking around in a human body, dispensing parables and ideas aimed at the salvation of mankind: all of that with no evidence that Jesus himself showed any interest in the idea of salvation. At the other end of the spectrum we have the 'historical Jesus' movement seeing a Ghandi/Martin Luther King type figure fighting for social justice in a very real human context. Accepting that there is no way to prove which end of the spectrum is correct; but being convinced that the 'emotion driven', 'personal relationship', 'born again and saved' end of the spectrum of Christianity tends to makes us irrelevant and useless; what does that leave us with?

Let us start with the model of a God outside time beginning a process 13.7 billion years ago with a big bang and a mechanism call evolution in the hope, aspiration, dream that sentient species would evolve capable of loving each other. Rooting our thinking in the world we live in today rather than harking back 1000 or even 2000 years what can we extrapolate from Jesus' clearly defined message of love, the Kingdom of God and thinking about God with a fresh heart/mind? Can we not perhaps see the extrapolation of Jesus' life, mission, death & resurrection as being clearly to mark the path for humans to follow in the quest to realise God's Dream?

Is it possible that in the bigger scale of God's hopes, dreams & aspirations for Creation the first century Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, tells us to follow the path of sharing, community and hope rather than the path of selfishness and the quest for power: the positive half of our makeup as humans, as described by Rutger Bregman, rather than the a negative 'traditional power-hungry force' that drives history; and one where we need to think of concentrating on summoning our better angels to suppress the darker side of human nature – buoyed by the hope that Rebecca Solnit brings us (see chapter 27 for both Bregman and Solnit). Does this not give us a way to understand the mission of Jesus which makes sense in the 21C? Doing so we might return to what Jesus set out to do: show us what matters to God and show us what God is like; or in other words show us the nature of God.

Jesus shows the nature of God in the very real human, socio economic context of 1st century Palestine and being a man he was limited to the understanding of the people of his time: discarding of course the idea of an omniscient God walking around in human form, though still seeing the truth of God in him. We see the inspiration, the love and the intention of God within someone whose claims are so outrageous as to be either true or the words of a madman.

PART 5 - UPDATING OUR VIEW of GOD

If we are not to become sadly more and more irrelevant, based on a core congregation who grew up with the church and are now dying out, we need to start thinking about our view of God in a creative way.

When you talk meaningfully to thinking Christians you realise that there a whole set of models or concepts people use to make sense of God to them. Some see God as 'out there'. Other see God as the definition of utmost love. Yet more regard God as a personification of something produced by the human mind. All are an attempt to make sense of the concept of God in an age where belief in God/gods is no longer routine in the society within which we live in the West.

The attempt presented next is a relative conventional 'take' on what God is and how he/she/it is involved with Creation. The nature of the model possibly exposes the limitations of a professional engineer's mechanistic based mind; but, as with a scientific type model, it better explains what we believe (commitment & loyalty) in than the more conservative ideas of God we have been bequeathed from Constantine.

CHAPTER 23 - AN ALTERNATIVE 21C MODEL of GOD

Theology is an attempt to describe God in ways that make sense in the context of the time and to the originator. For political reasons, both church and state, much of our modelling of God was somewhat frozen in the 4C. What follows is just one attempt at a model to explain Creation, God & Jesus Christ in terms fit for the 21C rather than the 19C, or even the 12C. Its building blocks are:

- There is a Creator, therefore life, creation & everything has meaning. In contrast the atheist's approach means that creation is purely random occurrence and that therefore nothing has intrinsic meaning.
- A 'Creator God outside time' began a process 13.7 billion years ago with a big bang and a mechanism called evolution, with the hope, dream, aspiration, plan (and if you are outside time and can see both the beginning & the end of time those terms all mean the same) that one or more sentient species would evolve capable of loving each other.
- In that sense 'love' is the fundamental factor/criteria/reason for the existence of everything & everybody in the created universe.
- From this we can view ourselves and any sentient species as being made in the image of God.
- Therefore humans are 'a' or 'the' result of God's dream;
- And it's our job to make God's dream come true.

In contrast the 19C German theologian, Paul Tillich, coined the phrase 'Ground of Our Being' to describe the idea of a God 'within' rather than 'out there': a concept that has never really been clear to most people. Kurt Struckmeyer in his *A Conspiracy of Love* uses a similar idea. The 'Ground of Our Being' concept is quite a mouthful in conceptual terms whereas Struckmeyer's concept of God being a personification of that selfless human love being defined in the New Testament as 'agape' is easier to understand. It doesn't help with a model that seeks to discern what the point of Creation is but then it's quite possible that a Creator model of God is not incompatible with the idea of God within us. In physics we understand light as both a wave form and a particle form of energy. Furthermore, at a conceptual level in physics we have both Quantum Mechanics at the micro level and Classical 'Einsteinian Relativity' at the macro level – and as yet we have not managed to reconcile the two with a grand theory of everything. Perhaps it is the same with God. Perhaps, conceptually, God has to be thought of as both outside the dimension of time AND within this world with its space/time dimensions.

For the moment we will stick with a 'Creator God outside time' who began a process 13.7 billion years ago with a big bang and a mechanism called evolution, with the hope, dream, aspiration, plan that one or more sentient species would evolve capable of loving each other.

To quote from Walter Wink's *The Human Being*, as discussed by Kurt Struckmeyer, with this turning away from a cartoon and other worldly view of Christianity:

“We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over from compulsive behavior - becoming ourselves, scars and all. It means embracing and transforming those elements in us that we find unacceptable. It means giving up pretending to be good and, instead, becoming real.”

Which fits with the idea that as humans, let alone Christians, it is our job to make God’s dream come true.

With whatever mechanism you choose to explain the existence, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (whom we know as the Christ) his advent in the world demonstrates & confirms the truths that:

- God IS: there is a God.
- God is as he is in Jesus: that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see God (we see the nature of God).
- The nature of God is ‘love’.
- There is some form of life after death.

Incidentally this model happens to validate the phrase ‘in the beginning the son was God and the son was with God’ because if Jesus was subsumed into a God outside time at his death then he was there with God at the beginning and at the end.

This model does not answer the questions as to the mechanism by which Jesus came to be the son of God but then it is arguable that postulation and theory as to the mechanism of Jesus as the Christ have proved to be counterproductive to his own proclamation of The Kingdom of God.

Historians postulate that there is an axial age from about 800 BCE to the end of the millennium where religions across the globe started changing and where thought started deepening. In it Judaism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism & Zoroastrianism all started becoming deeper, more spiritually aware and more introspective. As a by-product of this they all started becoming outwardly caring. The pattern is the same across most of the faiths though, that an inward focus produced to an outward looking change. Christianity was supposed to be the exception that proved the rule – requiring a commitment, loyalty & effort to – in archaic terms – a time/place where a Kingdom of God would be established on earth with its characteristics being love, truth & justice for all.

**CHAPTER 24 - THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT GOD
HOW WE SHOULD RESPOND to HIM/HER/IT
& HOW TO BEHAVE AS A CHRISTIAN**

Understanding that the words we translate as 'faith' meant commitment & loyalty to Jesus and to Paul makes it clear that Christianity was founded as a 'doing faith'. Whereas the things that Jesus, as a Jew, WASN'T interested in - discussing and arguing about the minutiae and the 'mechanism' of God – has been the source of most Christian discord in 2000 years. Remember, if we think in terms of God's dream being for species to evolve capable of loving each other it makes wider Christian love the prime *raison d'être* for creation. In contrast, for the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis the reason behind everything is that what God "cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind and quality – the kind of creatures HE intended us to be – creatures related to himself in a certain way"... "if you are right with him you will inevitably be right with all your fellow creatures". For many across the Christian world they prefer to start with their own faults (sins) and then take inspiration from the direct example of Jesus. Wherever we come from our focus has to be 'the outward example of Jesus' rather than 'inward contemplation of Christ'. It up to us to make God's Dream come true, and up to us to bring about the Kingdom of God. One has to acknowledge though that wherever you sit in the spectrum of these stances can be influenced by many things; amongst others: your own personality, the people who first influenced you, the community you come from and the characteristics of your upbringing.

Going from love to sin one not only echoes the disputes within Judaism around the time of Rabbi Hillel, and then later the differences in approach between Jesus & Paul, but one is arguably dealing with the founding difference between the mission of Jesus of Nazareth and the Axial age changes in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism & Confucianism. It is however in intellectual dispute where the emotions raised can get so out of hand that these differences have the potential to wreck every single loving precept of Jesus. So whilst arguing that it is not thoughts but loving actions that matter most to the God we see in Jesus, in the end it may not matter an iota as long as the actions coming out from all the different camps thought follow the same patterns of love and compassion. If they don't then we clearly have a problem. If they do then we may merely have an intellectual disagreement as to 'the number of angels we can fit on the head of a pin'.

Most of the way in to this guide and only now do we come to what should be the most important part of it – how we SHOULD live and behave as a Christian. It's incontrovertible that we HAVEN'T lived and behaved as the example of Jesus would show us; but in concrete terms what IS that?

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he describes the 'fruits of the spirit' in terms of Christian characteristics; but it is in the phrase 'The Kingdom of God' and the repeated description of what the kingdom is like that we see Jesus telling us how to behave. Combined with twinning the love of God with the love of neighbour, Jesus is telling us what is important to God during his mission, death & resurrection.

Jesus' Kingdom of God is characterised by justice, compassion, selfless action – all part of a package of wider love. Given that the message Jesus preaches is personal transformation demonstrated in a real social scenario, rather than religious observance, following Jesus is not just for Christians. His message transcends religious observance because it is a way of living rather than a pattern of worshipping. Believing (conceptually), being loved & worshipping are internalised, emotional experiences. Working to bring about the Kingdom of God is about making a more compassionate and just world for the hungry, the sick and the outcast. Following Jesus is about listening and doing.

To understand what the phrase entails you need to read the gospels with a mind free from preconceived thoughts. It is incontrovertible, as in it is fact rather than opinion or theory, that Jesus' words as rendered from his Aramaic speech into Greek refer to loyalty & commitment rather than the word 'faith' that we read in English translations. Which means that one of Jesus' prime focus was a commitment to the Kingdom of God where love, truth and justice are paramount.

Perhaps the most influential thought I've ever heard myself came in a sermon by Rev Carol Hibberd back in 2003. She suggested: "live by letting every little thing you do contribute to the Kingdom of God" by 'asking yourself every minute of the day if your actions are helping or hindering the Kingdom'. As an example, does running the morning shower for a few minutes to warm up whilst you go to the toilet help The Kingdom when it wastes water and electricity? Does

shouting at the driver who has just cut you up on the motorway help? Does ignoring the misery around you when someone cannot afford to eat or sleep under a roof help? Ask yourself this question of every little thing you do and it might help you live in a way that the God we see in Jesus wants.

At the very end of the day however there is a fragment in C.S.Lewis Narnia story *The Silver Chair* that stands for me as the defining reason for Christian commitment, for Christian intellectual belief and for Christian behaviour. In it Puddleglum, the marsh wiggler, Scrubb & Jill have gone into the underworld of Narnia looking for the long lost Prince Rillian. They have freed Rillian but before they can escape the Witch who has kept him enchanted for many years finds them and casts a powder on the fire which makes them dizzy:

“The Prince and the two children were standing with their heads hung down, their cheeks flushed, their eyes half closed; the strength all gone from them; the enchantment almost complete. But Puddleglum, desperately gathering all his strength, walked over to the fire. Then he did a very brave thing. He knew it wouldn’t hurt him quite as much as it would hurt a human; for his feet (which were bare) were webbed and hard and coldblooded like a duck’s. But he knew it would hurt him badly enough; and so it did. With his bare foot he stamped on the fire, grinding a large part of it into ashes on the flat hearth. And three things happened at once.

“First, the sweet heavy smell grew very much less. For though the whole fire had not been put out, a good bit

of it had, and what remained smelled very largely of burnt Marshwiggle, which is not at all an enchanting smell. This instantly made everyone's brain far clearer. The Prince and the children held up their heads again and opened their eyes.

"Secondly, the Witch, in a loud, terrible voice, utterly different from all the sweet tones she had been using up till now, called out, "What are you doing? Dare to touch my fire again, mud-filth, and I'll turn the blood to fire inside your veins.

"Thirdly, the pain itself made Puddleglum's head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic. "One word, Ma'am," he said, coming back from the fire; limping, because of the pain. "One word. All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a playworld which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by

the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say."

As a personal summary of faith 'intellectual' & commitment'
- Puddleglum's final statement 'does it for me': "I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia."

PART 6 -
HOW WE GOT HERE
& WHERE NEXT

CHAPTER 25 - TWO POLES of CHRISTIANITY

It is quite clear that there are two poles within Christianity. One begins with Jesus. It places love at its core and was key to the new community of Jesus' followers at a time when it was almost certainly led by women. Ignoring the grey, fuzzy parts of the history of humankind, the other pole is male led; it concentrates on theology & structure; it prioritises ideas over action; it is a product of power and concepts; it's leading actors are theologians like Tertullian and Augustine on the one hand and the Emperor Constantine on the other; it has turned Christian thought, intellectual belief & commitment both into an inward looking, 'navel gazing' intellectual belief system; and it has enabled a self-perpetuating, power seeking organisation that valued uniformity over the needs of people & communities. In words made legend with the movie Star Wars, it is hard not to wonder if this was not Christianity going to the dark side.

For Borg, as discussed by Struckmeyer earlier, the first view corresponds to his 'paradigm' of "Christian life as a life of relationship and transformation. Being Christian is not about meeting requirements for a future reward in an afterlife, and not very much about believing. Rather, the Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms life in the present". Whereas his other paradigm corresponds to the second view "of the Bible as the unique revelation of God, emphasizes its literal meaning, and sees the Christian life as centered in believing now for the sake of salvation later; and believing in God, the Bible, and Jesus as the way to heaven. Typically, it has also seen Christianity as the only true religion".

As discussed earlier it is quite possible that 'love versus sin & structure' started at least a generation before Jesus with the positions of Rabi Hillel and Rabi Shammai. Hillel characterised the Torah as: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to unto your fellow. That is the whole of the Torah; the rest is explanation; go and learn". Shammai on the other hand wanted people to live by the law of the priests. In many ways though it's criminally sad to see Jesus' life & words turned inside out to make him the poster boy of a belief system which has burned, murdered, shunned corralled figures striving for good throughout history.

Building on something referred to earlier it's ironic that only now, after 2000 years, are the very people who've preserved love as one of the key characteristics of Christian action and so kept alive what Jesus came to tell us about God – women – able fully to participate in the workings of the church; and it's sad that in doing so they too often have to absorb and parrot the sin & structure line propagated by men through the centuries.

There is another way though. One that chimes with the actions of the many millions of loving and caring Christians round the world and one which chimes with the many millions more non Christians who reject that subversive & pernicious intellectual core to our intellectual faith. Talking first, talking from my own perspective as a strategic thinker and industrial troubleshooter: we could recognise that WITHOUT the pernicious and evil of the 'Three Horseman of Christian sin, atonement theory and personal salvation' the core body of the teachings of the man Jesus of Nazareth -

whom we accept as the Christ and of whom we teach that we see God - resonates with everything good we see in the world around us. In part that is because women have preserved enough of the loving example of Jesus to shine through and help us shape the minutia of the world in which we live; and in part it is because love, care & cooperation is a fundamental trait of the species we are part of. That is after all one of the traits that lifted homo sapiens to a new level in their evolution. From a marketing point of view it seems inconceivable stupid for us to ignore the synergies between the essence of our beliefs and what the world we have helped create finds valuable. Other than those whose upbringing or conceptual thinking has twisted them, or for those who seem fundamentally flawed and evil, the actions of ordinary men and women are usually cooperative and caring. We COULD discard depraved attitudes coming down the centuries and instead build together one what we often agree on. After all it's what Jesus taught anyway; and a simple way of moving forward would be to adopt Carol Hibberd's little moniker that says "let every little thing you do contribute to the Kingdom of God".

From a less practical and significantly more enlightened perspective we have the thoughts left behind by the German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters From Prison*, before he was executed by the Nazis in Flossenbürg concentration camp just a few days before the end of WW2. He envisaged a time where Christianity became irrelevant because it was no longer needed to explain the world we live in; and he coined the phrase 'Religionless Christianity'. These words have piqued and challenged progressive Christians ever

since; but sadly he was executed before he could flesh out his thoughts fully. In many ways although the attitudes of the world towards Christian belief has progressed in a different direction to that which he predicted, the net result could be said to be the same. Quoting directly from Kurt Struckmeyer's work: "in the light of the horrors of WW2, perpetrated by people on all sides who claimed to be religious, Bonhoeffer saw a time coming in which religion would prove to be fundamentally irrelevant". In contrast the main response to Christian belief in the West in the 21C is apathy. Arguably the result is the same.

In a world where it longer needs God to explain how it (the world) worked Bonhoeffer saw two key elements to Christian practice – prayer and practical action. He saw the other, more formal trappings of the religion that Christianity has become as valuable only in so far as it acted as motivation for carrying out practical Christian action – or in the words of the Gospels 'bringing about the Kingdom of God'. Given that most of what has been written about Religionless Christianity has been reasoned speculation based on the phrase itself – a phrase seeming to be as much as a question as an answer – one could validly speculate whether Bonhoeffer would not perhaps have seen the risen Christ in the selfless act of one human being for another.

Quoting directly from synopses of two of Kurt Struckmeyer's books exploring a way forward for Christian thought and action in the light of Bonhoeffer's ideas – 'An Unorthodox Faith' & 'People of the Way' - "Jesus never intended to create a new religion of rites, creed & dogma.

Instead he announced the subversive arrival of the kingdom of God – a social and economic revolution of the heart based on a lifestyle of radical love, lavish generosity, inclusive hospitality, compassionate action, selfless service, a passion for justice, creative nonviolence and simple living”...”this way of life defined Christianity for three hundred years until the emperor Constantine invited the church to help rule an empire, and it’s countercultural lifestyle was replaced by a dogmatic belief system.” Struckmeyer clearly sees in Bonhoeffer’s ideas a way forward for Christian belief that harks back to Jesus’ life, words & mission.

CHAPTER 26 - AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

As referred to above recently I came upon the work of the living American theologian, Kurt Struckmeyer. His perspective is 'out and out' progressive – a position I have a great sympathy for – but more than this his work is challenging. It makes you think. As such it is vastly more useful to one's consideration of what the God we see in Jesus means than assenting to some of the ideas coming down the centuries. Ideas which, after due consideration, can seem distorted, outdated, bigoted & barbaric: ideas that might have come down through time from less enlightened eras - decades & centuries after the life & death of Jesus; ideas that a conservative, mindset has tended not to question; and ideas become sacrosanct merely by their very longevity. Sometimes these ideas are the hallmark of those that insist in the 'letter of the law'. In fact most liberal thinkers find themselves able to assent to and repeat the creeds but they do so in their historical contexts.

I cannot recommend Struckmeyer's books highly enough and alongside John Robinson's classic introduction to a more liberal theology 'Honest To God' it is a useful exposition of a tradition of thinking Christianity that is shadowed by the simplistic approach most of us have to revert to, however unsatisfactorily, because that is all that is taught. To cherry pick just a few themes I found myself particularly interested in the following topics.

BORG's PARADIGMS

We met Borg's paradigms earlier differentiating between the Gospel OF Jesus, "focused on the life of Jesus and his teachings: the Kingdom of God and the good news to the poor" and the Gospel ABOUT Jesus which is focused on "the death of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead and the consequences for our salvation". Although it should be noted that an understanding of Atonement as presented in *Recovering The Scandal of the Cross* by Green & Baker would indicate that a concentration on 'our salvation' is a fundamental misunderstanding anyway; and that the Paul was referring not to the salvation of individuals but rather the 'salvation of Israel'. The language is different but the distinction between the gospels OF and ABOUT Jesus mirrors the twin poles of Christianity discussed earlier.

Struckmeyer brings us back to a reality that can be missed when we shuttle regularly from the four gospels to the epistles – going from documents aiming to be OF Jesus to ones that are ABOUT Jesus: the Gospel OF Jesus is a social gospel; whereas the Gospel ABOUT Jesus is a spiritual gospel about the nation/individual's salvation (Green & Baker's *Recovering The Scandal Of The Cross* versus the 'traditional view'). Struckmeyer credits Paul with introducing mystical elements from within the wider Hellenistic world and draws a distinction between the 'real Jesus' and the 'Cosmic Christ' - or the 'pre Easter v post Easter Jesus'. Struckmeyer's analysis of these two themes will be breath-taking for some and, at the very least, thought provoking for others.

More than anything Struckmeyer's ideas exposes one to a very real side of Christian thinking that has stayed in the realm of academics & theologians whilst ordinary people in the congregation stick with the tried & tested – which in turn makes the vast majority of the population switch off and stop following/believing.

Reading his words one is reminded yet again of Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel (chapter 25):

“...**34** Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ **37** Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ **40** And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”

Jesus made no reference to sins, atoning for them or salvation of the nation or individual. Jesus preaches the Kingdom of God, thinking about God as a parent and love. To borrow those famous words from an American election campaign: “It’s love stupid”: love, love, love. Furthermore,

sin, atonement and salvation are not only, demonstrably, not 'of Jesus' but for many they are clearly a displacement activity. Focussing on one's inward spiritual life relieves one of doing anything to bring about the Kingdom of God. For many active believers this is not the case but it is for some.

HARNESSING THE PASSION OF YOUTH

Struckmeyer raises the issue of passion (as opposed to emotion) in his *People Of The Way* and, quoting Kenda Creasy Dean, wonders what would happen "if we really gave young people something to sink their teeth into, something to get excited about, something that would generate a passionate response and a lifelong commitment". Kenda Creasy Dean wanted to connect "passion of youth to the passion of Jesus – a passion for justice and peace, service and compassion, generosity and inclusion, love and forgiveness

MESSIANIC ROLE WITHIN ITS REAL LIFE CONTEXT

Struckmeyer has to be right in seeing Jesus within an emerging social scenario/environment of tension arising through exploitation of the common man. Human beings don't just spring up out of nowhere claiming an enhanced relationship with God; and speaking to the crowds in Chapter 2 of Acts Peter clearly talks about Jesus of Nazareth as a 'man whom you crucified'. Going back to the beginning of his ministry we see the beginning of his ministry in human terms, carrying on from where John the Baptist left off, rather than

in supernatural terms, which is the danger with a 'religion' where we read metaphysical motives into human situations. Of course this doesn't invalidate an conceptual belief that in the person of Jesus we see God and/or we see the nature of God; but then the degree to which Jesus was/wasn't divine was not decided upon for a few hundred years after his death anyway. For his early followers what was important was a commitment to what he said.

PROPHECY

Struckmeyer makes the point in relation to John Baptist using the metaphor of prophesy, that a prophesy was not a prediction. It was rather a warning or promise if certain conditions were not met.

EVIL

Struckmeyer spends a long time discussing evil, the sources of evil actions, the actions of evil people in Nazi Germany and the degree to which so called 'conservative evangelical' Christian belief has strong authoritarian and racist overtone, totally out of synch with the words and actions of Jesus. Leaving aside those who seem genuinely twisted and hateful, for whatever reason, I was struck by a number of quotes.

The first two are quotes from Martin Luther King in his Letter From Birmingham Jail during his Civil Rights campaign:

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God”

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice.”

The next is another quote from Martin Luther King: “The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict... [an individual] who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it”

Then a quote from Edmund Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

Next Tolstoy: “Wrong does not cease to be wrong because the majority share in.”

Finally Archbishop Desmond Tutu: “If you are neutral in situations of in- justice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

Struckmeyer says: "Some Christian clergy claim that being part of a church community makes people more loving, compassionate, and accepting. But based on significant bodies of research, that theory doesn't seem to be holding up. The majority of people who sit in pews on Sunday morning are not as loving and compassionate as claimed. They may demonstrate compassion on an interpersonal level, but corporately and politically, they act immorally." In 1932, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. His thesis was that a distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and that of groups, including economic classes, political factions, and nations. As individuals, people are often able to transcend their interests to the needs of others. Aggregated into larger social groups, however, people seemingly lose the capacity for empathy. Niebuhr proposed that human beings lack the moral imagination to sympathize with others outside limited personal interactions. They cannot fully extend their compassion for others beyond a certain boundary."

Going on, and in particular reference to American society, Struckmeyer says: "Conservative politics is based on maximizing the self-interest of individuals; therefore, they want limited regulations and controls, laissez-faire economics, small government, low taxation, and little or no assistance to needy persons and families. Unfortunately, most Christians support the objectives, which are far from the teachings of Jesus. Whatever conservative Christians are hearing in church is something other than the gospel of compassion, peace, justice and social inclusion that Jesus

proclaimed. Most likely, most churches are feeding their members a message of spiritual comfort and a heavy dose of eternal security, while overtly or tacitly supporting the status quo of the worst aspects of American society.”

He then repeats the following superb quote from David Bentley Hart (whose very literal and unparaphrased recent translation of the New Testament includes a detailed discussion about the meaning of key words in the original Greek that is fascinating in the extreme):

“I honestly believe that America uniquely is the land where Christianity went to die, and that the proof that it died here is that it could be so easily supplanted by a completely different religion. called "Christianity" and yet no one noticed the absurdity of it The American Evangelical religion is simply not the thing called Christianity, either faithfully or unfaithfully, throughout Christian history... Christians have always betrayed Christianity, and they have always misunderstood it. They've always in a casual way assumed that it was meant to affirm whatever it was they wanted to be valued. But I don't think that there's ever been another culture that could so sublimely corrupt and so sublimely efface the original Gospel and replace it with something else-with a counterfeit that's not just a dissemblance, but almost a polar opposite-in the way that American religious culture did. I don't know what else to say about America. We're the most religious country in the developed world, supposedly, but it's

definitely not Christianity that forms our religious consciousness.”

It is eminently arguable that not only is concentrating on sin, atonement & salvation a displacement activity from trying to bring about the Kingdom of God but it is also a cover for actions mitigating AGAINST the Kingdom of God. I refer again to the question of whether Christianity went to the ‘dark side’.

CALLED TO BE FULLY HUMAN

I quoted it previously but the section from Walter Wink’s *The Human Being* resonates with turning away from a cartoon and other worldly view of Christianity to one rooted in history, in the world we live in and therefore in God’s Creation:

“We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over from compulsive behavior - becoming ourselves, scars and all. It means embracing and transforming those elements in us that we find unacceptable. It means giving up pretending to be good and, instead, becoming real.”

CHAPTER 27 – DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

To repeat, again, I first came across Kurt Struckmeyer whilst search for references to Dietrich Bonhoeffer online; and my interest in Bonhoeffer's 'Religionless Christianity' has been recharged each time I have reread John Robinson's *Honest to God*. It is possible that there is not much to add, at this relatively superficial level, to that which I have quoted Struckmeyer saying about Bonhoeffer in the earlier chapter on the two poles of Christianity; and for a fuller summary of what Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity is about you couldn't get any better than reading Struckmeyer's take:

<https://followingjesus.org/religionless-christianity/>

One might however reasonably speculate in the same spirit that he uttered those words: words that have come down the years as intriguing now as they were when written.

Bonhoeffer's analysis of Christian organisations and congregations had left him shaken by the degree to which they had become irrelevant in opposing evil and in fact often implicit in maintaining evil; and he went on to think of a time where traditional Christian practice and conceptual belief was outdated and unnecessary. The first still applies today and we have arrived at the second part of it in a roundabout way: the way some heavily Christian populations behave mirrors the first and the way the rest of the population regard Christian practice with apathy and tolerant condescension mirrors the second. What then is left for genuine Christian action?

Over the last few years there are two very different books which, I suggest, might contribute to an understanding of Religionless Christianity. The first is Rutger Bregman's *Humankind - A Hopeful History*. Bregman is a modern day humanist as in he doesn't believe in a God (as opposed to the original Renaissance humanists who aimed to read and understand Christian writing in the context of the time in which they were written). In his book he explores both how the collaborative nature of human beings contributed to the rise of the species; and, then separately, how invariably there was a positive human story of 'care and concern' behind many of the horrific cases of man's humanity to man, particularly referring to certain incidents of rape and murder reported on by the press. He postulates that stories of ordinary human decency are just much less salacious and therefore newsworthy; but that fundamentally humans ARE caring; and that there IS hope for our species.

The second book is Rebecca Solnit's *Hope In The Dark* in which she looks back at a history of activism and social change over the past five decades and contrasts it with the attitudes of activists like herself who concentrate on what has NOT been achieved. Quoting from the back cover of the book: "following in the footsteps of the last century's thinkers – including Woolfe, Gandhi, Borges, Benjamin and Havel – [she] conjures a timeless vision of cause and effect that will light our way through the dark, and lead us to profound and effective political engagement. In particular I was struck by her pointing out, time after time, just how much HAD been achieved rather than what HADN'T.

What also struck me was the degree to which she described small groups of dedicated activists advancing the cause of progressive humanity in a way that further the human condition of love, care & compassion but in a way that was 'issue driven' – issues where it was obvious that had no direct link with a conservative church. One therefore wonders whether part of Religionless Christianity could not be to reach out and act hand in hand with other groups to further humane compassion for whatever and whoever needs it.

Contradicting myself about the obvious evil Christian organisations – churches and governments – have done down over the centuries; in the light of Tom Holland's conclusions as to the degree to which Christianity has shaped the western mind, is it not reasonable to view democracy, human rights and a concern for basic human dignity as an outcome of Christianity and of Jesus?

In that sense, and I come back to something I quoted earlier, are we not seeing the Christian ethos being played out at ground level when we see selfless acts of love, compassion, justice and tolerance being performed for one human by another? May we not, for instance, be entitled to see the life, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus as a confirmation that, of all the actions carried out by THIS sentient species (human beings), THIS is what it is all about? That, LOVE, is the point of Creation; that THIS is the *raison d'être* for everything; and that THIS is what Bonhoeffer's ideas come down to?

CHAPTER 28 – AN ECUMENICAL & MULTIFAITH VIEW

Extrapolating the thoughts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Rutger Bregman – and placing them within the mindset of a God outside time with an aspiration/dream/plan of sentient species evolving capable of loving each other – how should we view other Christian denominations and other faiths?

Denomination wise we need to start by recognising the harm caused, in the past, by most of the organisations of which we are the heirs; and recognising just how much we have got wrong understanding that it would be folly to claim to be right. For example:

- The Roman Catholic church sponsored religious bigotry throughout Europe in the 16C in an attempt to ‘keep the line’.
- A country with an established Anglican church (my own country & my own denomination) was responsible for amongst others: tolerating the industrialisation of slavery in the 18C whereby, of the two main industrial slaver countries, British ships transported of 3.4 million people across the Atlantic with in transit death rates possibly as high as 25%; and accepting a system in India whereby up to 10 million people died (1/3 of the population) in a Bengal famine exacerbated by the actions of the rapacious British East India Company.

- The Lutheran churches of Germany kept quiet and fell into line with the evil of Nazism.
- Conservative Evangelical, Protestant churches and congregations in the USA take hard line and militantly aggressive positions on issues such as abortion and homosexuality about which Jesus showed absolutely no interest whatsoever; as well as being a driving force behind militant modern colonialism and a driving force behind racial bigotry.

If we wake up to the failures within our own denominations we could perhaps accept that other denominations are no worse than our own, and instead accept that they have just evolved differently. One alternative take on the issue was heard recently with a church leader describing the spectrum of denominations as different flavours of crisps. She was right.

One key to increasing acceptance of one another might be to differentiate between truth and mechanism. For Christians the truth is that God IS, that he/she/it is as (s)he is in Jesus and that (s)he is Love. The mechanism by which we see God in Jesus, and what God is, is mere detail or mechanism. It's unknowable and arguing about it is akin to the theological metaphor of arguing how many angels will fit in the head of a pin.

Extrapolating Bonhoeffer's ideas of religionless Christianity further we could recognise the value in any individual human, community and/or religion in which love has come

to be central to its ideas. The manner in which that community came to that conclusion is in itself irrelevant; the beliefs that led to it; and the way we think & practice are all all just different paths to the same end.

Let us now go one step even further and understand that ANY individual, whether atheist, agnostic or of whatever faith, is acting in accordance with the dream of the God we see in Jesus if he/she treats people with love and care. It matters not what you 'believe' in its modern conceptual sense. It is, however, of absolute importance that you believe (in its meaning of commitment & loyalty as used by Jesus and Paul) in treating your fellow humans, the other animals we encounter and the very universe we live in with love, compassion and care. In that sense you may very well be a follower of Jesus whether you think of yourself as Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Moslem, agnostic or atheist; and likewise you might NOT be a follower of Jesus even if you think of yourself as a Christian.

I am a white, Protestant Christian so I think in those terms; however, I have to accept that others won't/don't/can't. So to end this particular section let us consider words from the recent film made from Robert Harris's story about the election of a new Pope: 'Conclave'. There is a fragment in the script which says "Certainty is the enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance". Somehow that seems incredibly important.

FINALLY

If conducted with a challenging mindset the more you study, think and mull the more you are led to some disturbing possibilities. I have a deep loyalty & commitment to the God that I see in Jesus. Therefore, whatever I write comes of frustration from seeing what the wider Christian church and Christian community have made of Jesus' life, death, resurrection & mission. At times we in the West have made such a mess of the world that one OUGHT to ask oneself the question as to whether Christian belief, in its modern meaning, has been a net force for good down the ages; and one DOES wonder where humanity would be if God had not been revealed as exhaustively as he/she/it was in the person of Jesus. As Tom Holland argues in "Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind" Christian thinking has been at the very centre of the development of the modern world; but the question remains as to whether a world that had developed WITHOUT Christian thought would have been any worse or any better. On the face of it it's not at all clear. Yes Christianity has been influential in the West and yes that influence has stretched into much of the rest of the world.

Using my model, one would like to think that a God outside time, being able to see the beginning and the end as well as every point in between, would not have begun the process of creation had he/she/it not known that it would be good; however, there is a philosophical argument which says that one cannot know the beginning, middle & end until one has actually started the process. Secondly, even if the net force in Creation from Christian (or a Christian type) thought

on another world far far away, were good, it doesn't mean that it is/was good in OUR world.

At the end of the day one cannot know, and once Creation has reached the end of time, it may not matter. All one can do is concentrate on one's own little bit, here and now, to try and make it better in accordance with the God we accept as being revealed in Jesus. In that context, and to quote the superb little section from Walter Wink's *The Human Being YET AGAIN*:

“We are not required to become divine: flawless, perfect, without blemish. We are invited simply to become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed over and over from compulsive behavior - becoming ourselves, scars and all. It means embracing and transforming those elements in us that we find unacceptable. It means giving up pretending to be good and, instead, becoming real.”

My own three poles to hang on to when disturbing questions arise are: first, those particular examples I've seen of Christian people around me, living out their lives by contributing to the Kingdom of God; second, Tom Holland's suggestion that mothers teaching their young children the loving stories of Jesus kept a commitment to a loving God alive when men through history lost sight of what it was to be one of his followers; and third that if we both believe that the values by which Western society lives are right and that Christianity has been incredibly influential in the making of

the Western world then in some way the Love of God as preached by Jesus of Nazareth HAS changed the world. Incontestably though it's still work in progress. At the end of it all however I'm still with Puddleglum:

“I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it and I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia.”

THE END

19 April 2025