

Who is Jesus?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Epiphany 1

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For just a few days longer we are in the season of Christmas, celebrating the coming of Jesus Christ. On Wednesday we begin the season of Epiphany, when we reflect on the revealing of the Christ child to the world. This then seems a very good time to be asking one of the most fundamental questions about our faith. "Who exactly is Jesus Christ?" Even the secular, non-Christian world asks this question over and over again. On a recent blog site where yet again the existence of God and the consequences of Christianity were debated endlessly I found this quote about Jesus. "*Personally, I think Jesus was an original hippy, trade unionist, and social reformist. No wonder they strung him up*"? The question about who Jesus is one of the most important questions we can ask but as this quote shows, we interpret who Jesus is from our own cultural perspective. For example you can only see Jesus as a hippy if you vaguely know what that might be. In the 19th century there was a great push to work out who and what the Jesus of history was really like. Countless books were written about it. Finally Albert Schweitzer, a medical doctor and missionary, pointed out that all the books about Jesus simply revealed who and what the author was not Jesus. Schweitzer wrote, "*he is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed with modern theology*".

Yet the question about who Jesus is remains a vitally important question to ask. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis, had a slight twist on the question. He said that this central question can only be asked from a particular and personal point of view. The question is, "who is Jesus Christ for me or for you?" Christianity in its essence is not a tribal religion. Of course it has been co-opted by empires and groups wishing to use its influence to bolster their claims to power and legitimacy but the decision to be a Christ follower must always remain the choice of a free individual. Even in the darkest hours of Christian imperialism and coercion there have been voices of true Christ like dissent. In fact to truly follow Christ is more likely to set you at odds with the culture around you, so-called Christian, secular or otherwise. I think that was the meaning of Jesus' often confusing statement when he said he came not to bring peace but a sword and that brother would be set against brother, mother against child. Being a Christian does involve being part of a community but it never involves not being a free, individual with a personal, direct relationship with the God of all. It should never involve surrendering your mind, will and intellect to anything other than the Christ.

So the question about who Jesus is for me and for you is a deeply personal question with potentially life changing consequences. Only you or I alone can ultimately answer that question and live through the answers we find. However we are given guidance and clues to help us on the journey of finding the answer – and it is a journey. The four accounts we have of Jesus' life we have in the New Testament were written to answer just this question and from each of them we get a slightly different perspective. It is like reading the words of four people who witnessed the same events but each recorded a different angle. It is a good thing I think that our biblical account of Jesus is so layered and complex. It saves us from the trap of simple answers. Some of the most profound clues we have are contained in this opening section of John's Gospel, one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament.

No one could accuse the writer of John's Gospel of being simple. The prologue to the Gospel that we heard read this morning is full of meaning and symbolism. I'm going to pick just two

concepts the writer uses to answer the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ They are the Word and Flesh. In the very first line of the very first chapter the writer states that Jesus is the Word. What a way to describe something!—as the Word. Not a word, not some word but **the** Word.

The Greek word for Word is “logos” from which we get our word, logic. In Greek philosophy at the time it referred to universal divine reason. This divine reason was an eternal and unchanging truth present from the time of creation. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus used the word logos to refer to a rational divine intelligence, which today is sometimes referred to in scientific discourse as the “mind of God.” But the writer of John’s Gospel was also well versed in Hebrew scripture and thought. In Hebrew the word for “Word” is ‘dabar’. “Dabar” is not just a noun, the name for something. Dabar is a verb and it means something that is active and creative. So when God speaks at the beginning of Genesis, his words create – earth and heavens, stars and moons, animals and plants and humans. When John writes of Jesus as the Word he is describing Jesus as a creative, generative power. One way to look at it this passage— and one more in keeping with John’s idea – is that if God is the idea, then the word is what speaks the idea. And this word creates. If God is love, then Jesus is loving and a loving that creates a reality.

You could be forgiven for thinking that this is all very esoteric and not very practical but this one concept underpins all other Christian ideas about God and his purpose and vision. According to the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich, *“He who sacrifices the Logos principle sacrifices the idea of a living God, and he who rejects the application of this principle to Jesus as the Christ rejects his character as Christ.”* In other words, without an understanding of God’s love, will, and power as a living and active force in the world— through the logos in the Christ and through our participation in the logos with our reason— the Christian message becomes a lifeless set of doctrines which can be accepted or rejected without bearing on one’s life.

The idea of the logos, the dabar, the Word, may be highly philosophical but is highly relevant. Linguistic philosophers will tell you that words create reality. Our language with its power of description and naming create the culture around us. Neuro-physicists say the same thing. The words in our mind, our attitudes, create a large part of the reality of our physical bodies. If we walk around thinking, what a crummy, boring, horrible life, what annoying, frustrating people, I must deal with then, guess what? that is exactly how you will feel. That is what you will see as you go about your daily business. If you walk around thinking what an absolute blessing this life is and expressing gratitude for each and every moment of existence then guess what – that is what you will experience. Our thoughts, our words, create a reality. However, our Gospel account of Jesus presents him as more than just a construct of our language. He is not a mythological being part of a great cosmic story. He is the beginning of the story. He is central and primal. He is the Word, the all-encompassing creative idea, the progenitor of life itself. This is a big idea.

It is the next idea that brings this all down to earth. The Word became flesh. This is one of the most beautiful ideas in the Christian faith – it is also one of the most scandalous and misunderstood. In our modern world it is so much easier to think of Jesus as just another spiritual teacher. The idea of the eternal Word made flesh is very strange in comparison. But again this is a central teaching of the faith – the Word became flesh. The word flesh evokes images of the body, particularly the human body, but if we think about it we find that human bodies are connected to animal bodies and the material world around us. We and the universe are all made from the same stuff – star dust. We and the universe are all connected by the same energy—star dust energy. In Luke’s Gospel John the Baptist echoes Isaiah when he says, “all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord”. What is not flesh?

The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us and all flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord. This idea does not leave the divine distant and removed from creation. This puts eternity in the real, material world in front of us each moment. It says the redemption of the whole of creation – humans, animals, river systems, the whole earth—is part of God’s purpose and plan. Without Jesus as flesh there would be no Christmas and no Easter. When Jesus became flesh humans could then understand God in a more personal and intimate way. When Jesus became flesh then the reconciliation between the spiritual and the material became possible.

In a previous ministry I used to teach religious education to year 8 students. We began the year with talking about the “More than”. We put forward the idea that there was more to life than what we could see, or touch or measure. There was more to life than the material world. We then asked that if there were a realm, a reality, beyond the one we could observe, how would beings from that world communicate with us. Hands would go up and the students would say things like through, dreams, angels, intuition, hunches and the like. And then always some student would say – the being would become one of us so they could talk to us directly and clearly. I loved it when that student gave the punch line! That boy or girl saw the one event that could make all the difference to our relationship with God. Because Jesus became flesh we can know God as one of us, the best of one of us. We can also know ourselves more honestly and clearly. It takes a being from outside our small and limited mindset to show us eternal truth and love and to show us how far we fall short of what we are capable. By becoming flesh Jesus can lead us from the darkness of violence, hatred and oppression into the dawn of freedom and salvation.

We are human beings, creatures of flesh and blood. I know my heart responds more to another human heart than to big ideas. I like to know that the person I call saviour and friend wept and laughed. I love it that Jesus had good friends, bad friends and no friends. It feels right and proper that he annoyed his Mother, bugged his Father, wet his nappy and didn’t like his greens. For me it makes all the difference in the world that Jesus knows exactly what it is like to be fully human from cradle to grave and who despite the cruelty and suffering dealt to him by those he loves, forgives, embraces and heals with that same love. For when the Word became flesh the world was enlightened. The light shone in the darkness and no power can over come its illumination.

In a few short phrases John’s gospel gives us these two ways to answer the question – who is Jesus? Word and flesh. If our faith is to be balanced it must hold these concepts together. We need to ground our faith in the messiness of human life – its ambiguity, its suffering and it’s unanswered questions of which there are aplenty. At the same time our faith must look with imagination beyond the obvious into the possibilities into which God calls us into—those big ideas. In Jesus it all comes together as he leads us into freedom, justice and peace. And he will lead us if we give him the chance. As you go on to ponder that question, “Who is Jesus for me?” I’d like to leave you with a quote about Jesus from Albert Schweitzer.

“He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they will pass through in His fellowship and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, Who He is.”

May we all come to know who he is. Amen