



St Mark's Church, Bedford

What is a Christian ?



'The Cross is the Way'
an original altar frontal by Mrs Jean Kirk

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Introduction

You might not know anything at all about the Christian faith or you may just want to think it all through again starting from the beginning. This small booklet is an introduction to help explain what Christianity is all about.

The Christian religion can be very confusing especially when different Christian leaders and churches appear to disagree with each other. If Christians have different understandings of God, does that make Christianity less trustworthy? Well, in almost everything, people disagree; doctors disagree about how to treat patients, economists disagree on how we should turn around recessions. Whether it is football, politics or religion, we all see things differently. I am not too worried about disagreements because in truth we are all thinking and working out our ideas and if we continue learning, then we will change our thoughts as we grow. I actually find it reassuring when Christians debate and express their faith in different ways; maturity comes through growth and change. An influential Christian of the 19th century, Cardinal John Henry Newman, said

“To live is to change, to be perfect is to have changed often.”

The important thing is not that we disagree, but that we listen and learn from one another; we all have different points of view and none of us have all the answers. In 16th century England, Protestant Christians killed Roman Catholics and Roman Catholics killed Protestants. There was a lot of politics and more going on than just disagreements over issues of faith, but nevertheless it was all done by people who called themselves Christians. Hopefully we have all moved on a lot from then, but we still need to learn from history and recognize that Jesus called his followers to be united, and the desire to be known as a certain denomination or type of Christian can be very destructive. Jesus said that people will come to faith when they see how Christians love one another, not by how well they argue their own point of view. We must accept our own limited understanding and recognize that sometimes our deeply held convictions might just be our point of view and not God's. When we think about God,



Humans have always wanted to reduce God down to our own size.

we will do well also to remember the words of a wise Christian who lived in the fourth century, Saint Augustine. He said some very profound things, but I believe that one of his best was this;

'If you can understand it, it is not God.'

What he meant by this was that if we seriously want to fully understand everything about the God who made the universe, we will be disappointed. Such a God must inevitably be beyond our human comprehension, and so obviously we will have to learn to live without some of the answers. Even the Apostle Paul who is sometimes quoted in support of one point of view or another acknowledged that we

are only groping around for truth in the dark when he said *'we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror' 1 Cor 13:12.*

However despite the things which Christians see differently, the teachings of Jesus are as fresh and inspiring today as they were over two thousand years ago. Jesus gave us a central core of belief as the important basic truths of Christianity. This booklet provides a short introduction for those who are interested to know more about what these basic truths are. However the Christian faith is not like passing an exam. Christians believe in a living God whom we love with our hearts as well as our minds. Knowing God is more important than knowing *about* God; more about that later.

A Pilgrimage

There are some things which it is important to understand if you want to call yourself a 'Christian', but actually there are not many! The earliest creed in the Bible simply had people say that Jesus was Lord. (*1 Corinthians 12:3*). The Christian faith is often helpfully described as a pilgrimage. By using the word 'pilgrimage' we recognise that the Christian life is a journey of discovery, learning, growing and changing.

**Faith is God does not
give us all the answers
but points us in
the right direction**



Most Christians who look back at their own understanding of God, recognise that their views have changed over time; it is a process. This is not a sad reflection, that we didn't get it right in the first place! If we have not moved and changed our ideas, then surely we have not grown or developed. Sadly there are some people who tell everybody else what they should believe about a whole range of issues, from deep theological ideas to practical daily living. Many courses in Christian faith are complete manuals of theology and lifestyle which just happen to coincide with the personal position of the spiritual leader. Once we have understood that nobody has a monopoly on truth, we can appreciate that each one of us must have the confidence to think, and discover the kind of person that God wants us to be. There is no need to be fitted into a religious mould, God has unique and individual children; he doesn't make clones, so you should feel included and affirmed to be the person God wants you to be.

Why bother with religion?

Christians believe that faith in God answers our most basic human need for life to have meaning. The trend towards materialism is a blind alley, for in our hearts we know that possessions, money, fame - the things which we spend so much of our time chasing, are never adequate to satisfy us in themselves. If we make the mistake of seeking fulfillment in material goods or earthly ambitions, then we are doomed to disappointment and a lack of fulfillment. The stuff which we so easily become preoccupied with - promotion, qualifications, materialism - none of these can ever provide that for which we search deep inside our souls. Indeed, the opposite is true, pursuit of happiness in itself is quite destructive, and unfulfilling. Think of the lives of so many wealthy or famous people who are deeply unhappy and unfulfilled. In church on Ash Wednesday in Lent, we symbolically place ash on our forehead. This graphically reminds us that in the end *'we are just dust and to dust we will return.'*

All the things which we desire and surround ourselves with, eventually come to nothing. This is the



paradox of the pursuit of pleasure in which many people are engaged. Ultimately no matter how hard we pursue material goals, we are still left feeling empty and seeking more. Our society today is perhaps dashing about more than ever before; we are rushing backwards and forwards like a plate spinner on a stage trying to achieve some life balance. Yet for all of our activity, people are no more happy in their lives. There is in all of us a sort of divine predisposition which points us back to God. That need points to the existence of a God who can satisfy our spiritual desire. This is the theme of the prayer of St. Augustine which speaks about the origin and the goal of human nature. It is one of the best prayers ever written and like many really good prayers it is worth remembering it and taking it to heart —

*‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you’*

The prayer recognises that we are made by God and we experience a deep sense of longing which only God can satisfy. Psalm 42 in the Bible expressed this.

‘As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you.’

There is a modern hymn written to these words

‘Like the deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you.’

It is a soothing and beautiful song, but think of a deer which is exhausted having run through woods, perhaps pursued by wild animals and it eventually finds a stream from which to drink. The deer would be frantic and exhausted. That is a condition which many will be able to relate to in our hectic lives, perhaps finding faith after a time of metaphorically searching in the wilderness.

Knowing God

We have to be careful not to give the impression that being a Christian means learning about God. Christianity is not just for the intellect, it is for the heart as well as for the head. Christianity can degenerate into little more than an intellectual system of factual beliefs, but the Christian faith isn't knowing about things, it is an ‘encounter,’ meeting with God. Christian faith provides answers to meaninglessness because it introduces us to God in a real and personal way. Our faith is an answer to our angst, to our ‘lostness’, to our seeking. The Gospel stories of Jesus in the Bible tell about so many people who met with God in Jesus and how he established relationships with them. These Gospels are not textbooks, giving theoretical knowledge about the universe; they are introductions to a God who loves us and who became human, as Jesus of Nazareth.

God doesn't reject us

Christians believe that Jesus was God 'incarnate' or God 'in flesh,' and so from the life of Jesus we can see what God is like.

The Bible tells us that although we may be rejected by people, we will never be rejected by God. For example, Jesus met Zacchaeus; he was a terrible cheating tax collector who climbed a tree to try and see Jesus, thinking himself too sinful to come close with ordinary people. Jesus saw him, called him near and said *'I'm coming to have tea with you.'* There is nobody too sinful for Jesus to make friends with and even the Apostle Paul who rounded up Christians to be killed was welcomed into the Christian community.

In another story there was a woman who wanted to touch the clothes which Jesus wore, recognising that he was someone with special power. She hardly dared to go near him, because she suffered from a physical illness which made her a social outcast. Yet Jesus reached out to her and healed her. The message of the life of Jesus is clear, that God welcomes everybody, just as we are. The love of God is wider than ours and includes the whole world equally. We are all God's children and this is something Christians have struggled to come to terms with because our level of acceptance is more narrow than God's and we generally like people like us.

Can God speak to us?

Some people learn about God and study religious beliefs, but they never move away from the academic facts. However Christians make a profound claim that God can be known, that a part of our soul can draw close to God in a personal way, just like in a human relationship. We also know from the stories of Christian people, that sometimes God doesn't wait for us to take the initiative in getting to know or understand about him. Many people describe a religious awakening as a



Miller, Mary Jane 2008
A Mother's Love

time when God seemed to be 'knocking on the door.' God may be seeking you now! You probably won't hear any heavenly voices, or see bright lights, but nevertheless you may be conscious of what some have described as the still small voice of God in your soul. God is there and

waiting for you to respond. Each one of us is involved in relationships; we know other people and have interaction with them. The Christian faith is about such a relationship, an encounter with God.



Faith is being prepared to take a risk, daring to believe.

In the Bible, the Apostle Paul uses the same word to describe God drawing near to us, as we might use of a couple getting back together again. God is not an inanimate rock to be studied, not a cold lifeless concept to be explored. God is personal, and we were made in the image of God. A parable which Jesus told described God as like a loving parent who embraces a child even though they have done bad things. So, Christians believe that in the person of Jesus, God comes running after us. The Jesus we see crucified on the cross is God's free and endless commitment of love. We can enter into the experience of that relationship, not knowing all the answers, taking lots of risks, or we can walk away, the choice is ours.

It takes faith to reject God

Some people are afraid of even beginning to draw closer to God; they want answers first and some kind of proof. However it is just as much a leap of faith not to believe in God as it is to eventually take the plunge and open up yourself to the risk of faith. Science and human knowledge can neither prove or disprove God. Belief or unbelief demands a certain amount of 'faith' because we just don't know enough! In the absence of any compelling proof we might be tempted to say that we do not know enough 'about' God, but God does not want or need you to be clever and know facts, God simply wants you to draw close.

There is a vast wealth of amazing information about God and how people have worshipped, yet faith is not an academic affair. It should rather be like a love affair to which we respond with our hearts and commit our lives. It is through this encounter that we grow to 'know' God. The word 'knowledge' in the bible is used of the very closest relationships and it is this kind of bond which we can share in God's company. This is something which is very hard in our society today, particularly because very few people have time to think about anything anymore; everybody is so busy. The problem about living very busy lives is that we can become shallow. We can become cut off from our spiritual roots. Perhaps never before has there been so much need for people to be open to God and recognize the spiritual part of their lives.

We should learn as much as we can about what God has taught us through the Bible and the lives of other Christians. However the most important thing that we can do is allow space for God to touch our lives. The bible teaches that when we seek God we shall find him. In the Psalms (34:8) in the Old Testament it says

'Taste and see that the Lord is good'.

A dish may look good and be recommended by the chef, but we will only know for ourselves if we try it and taste. We can talk recipes until we are blue in the face, but it is only when we taste that we can appreciate what food is really like. Have you an appetite to know God, to taste and see? That is the big question.

Doubts

Our human weakness is such that even in the most committed relationships we sometimes need reassurance. The Christian faith is no different and at times everyone of us will have doubts and difficulty with belief. That is why we use the word 'faith,' because it is not about proof; we are involved in a relationship with God and there has to be trust. I have noticed that sometimes people are often most zealous about things which they are not quite or cannot be quite sure about! On the other hand, doubt can be an indication of real honesty and can help our faith to grow as we question and learn. Jesus said that faith even the size of a tiny mustard seed was enough to make a start. Faith can slowly grow as it learns to live with the questions which we cannot answer, in the light of the answers which we have.

We probably all have stories of how people have been 'put off,' by earnest tub-thumping Christians or other religious fundamentalists who bully others about what they should believe. We all appreciate being given the opportunity to think and reflect in our own time and at our own pace. Sharing our ideas and thoughts about God should never be 'forcing our religion down other people's throats'. Listen to a passage from 1 Peter 3:15



"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ...".

The passage suggests sharing faith only when the other person has given us permission to do so. We must try to live out our Christian witness courageously, but whilst being careful about what we say. This is probably the very best example anyway; actions speak far louder than words.

If you are somebody who is unsure about the Christian faith, then do speak with somebody who is a Christian and ask them about what they believe. Remember that faith is caught and not taught and we are less likely to be won over by arguments. Very often belonging to a church community and being alongside other Christians is the best way to find God in others and we are drawn towards faith.

Most people look back and realise that there has been a process, which can take place over years and often involves significant people. We are also usually attracted most of all by the lives of other Christian people, not what they believe. This means that most people come to faith over a long period, they slowly become Christians, and for many people it can be years rather than months. The best thing is to start by joining a church and meeting other Christians. Jesus welcomes everybody and his ministry was the most inclusive and affirming of everybody who came close to him. It is important to find a church community which shares that same welcome as Jesus.

What do Christians believe ?

I have always found it helpful when making a summary of Christian belief, to use the words which are found in a form of the baptism service. At this special service in church we welcome children or adults into membership and the people who are present are asked to declare their commitment to some important beliefs. Imagine that you are in the baptism service and consider these three questions.

Question 1

Do you believe and trust in God the Father who made the world ?

Between 5,000 million and 4,000 million years ago the earth was formed. By 3,000 million years ago life had arisen and we have fossils of microscopic bacteria-like creatures to prove it. Some time between these two dates that mysterious event occurred, the origin of life. We don't know how it all happened; there are many biological and scientific theories which try to explain what processes were taking place. One day we may come to know how creatures were created from the building blocks of life itself. However, more importantly, we need to think about who or what caused creation. Where did the basic substances; methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide, and other gases come from?

There are some Christians who take Genesis literally and believe that God made the world in six days and then had a rest on the seventh.

There is no time to debate this point in this short introduction, suffice to say that this is the view of only some Christians, and it is based on selecting one of two different accounts of creation which are found in Genesis itself. Other Christians believe



Christians believe that the world was made by somebody who knew what they were doing – it wasn't an accident.

that the creation stories in the Bible paint a poetic picture of creation, but they do not tell us how it happened. For that we need to use science and the learning which God gives us.

What Christians do all agree upon is that the Bible teaches us that it wasn't all an accident. It didn't happen by chance. Behind creation there was a Creator - it was if you like 'An Act of God.'

One thing upon which all the world's great religions agree, is that life comes from God and it is not an accident but precious to him. Most of us would say that we don't feel like an accident, we feel unique and special. Science tells us that this is true, we all have unique DNA. The Christian faith tells that although as human beings we co-operate with God in the work of creation; it was God who made us, who loves us and that God cares about us. Each one of us is not an accident, but rather an Act of God, made for a purpose. It is only when we meet with our Creator that we realise just how important our lives really are and what God's purpose for us is.



We don't know how the world was made, but Christian believe that they do know who made it.

Where did the world come from ?

If you look at the story of creation in Genesis in the Old Testament there are no big bang theories, no theories of evolution, we are not told which test tubes God mixed to create life. This is very sad, since we all love to understand how things come about, but God does not give us the science. Instead we have a story, which tells us in broad brush principles that God made it and that sadly we messed it all up.

There is nothing which says whether it was made by evolution; perhaps it was and perhaps it wasn't. The old debate is rather sterile and as Christians we simply have to say we just don't know how. When Darwin wrote his book '*On the origin of the species by means of natural selection*' in 1859, it created rows of immense proportions. I

believe that it was a futile argument, because the Bible does not seek to give us a chronological account of creation in the creation stories. When we study the Bible we realise that modern chronological timescales are of little importance to any of the biblical writers. In the Gospel stories in the New Testament different writers move incidents from the beginning of Jesus ministry to the end. The order in which the events were placed was not considered important. This is not a new understanding; hundreds of years ago Saint Augustine suggested that the Biblical writers might have been presenting a literary account of creation, rather than a scientific one and that creation might have taken a long time. To use the word 'day,' is a good way of separating the things that God did. This would explain how the story has day and night, before the sun and moon were created!

Truthfully there is much we just do not know. What the Bible is however clear about, is that it was God who made the world and it tells us how we should respond. As an example we learn that work was planned into society as a means of us being occupied and producing from the world. God is a God of work and we might conclude that God would not be pleased at the thought of unemployment. Politicians often say that Christians should keep out of political and secular issues. This is a strange idea because God put it all together and he laid down principles for living. We live in God's world, it is vibrant and full of God's life. The Old Testament prophets saw this. They saw the mind of God in simple illustrations from life, like boiling pots and plumb lines, and so they were angry when they saw poor people exploited and powerful people who took advantage of the weak.

The Christian view is that Creation is good and of value in itself, apart from its usefulness to humankind. In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, which means 'beginning,' it says
'God saw everything that He had made and it was good'. Gen 1:31

In one of the Gospel stories in the New Testament, the part of the Bible which recorded the life of Jesus, the Apostle John wrote
'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. John 3:16
The word for world is KOSMOS which means everything! God loves everything including the soil and the fields, all of creation and space itself. So it is that Christians believe that the world is not a larder simply to be consumed for our own use.

Question 2

Do you believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ, who redeemed humankind ?

All of the major world religions agree that God created all that there is. What makes Christians different is that they believe something very important about a man called Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago and who grew up in a Jewish community in Nazareth. The historical evidence for the life of Jesus is recorded by independent Jewish and Roman historians, as well as by his followers in the pages of the New Testament. However, Christians believe that Jesus was not merely a man, but God himself in



human form. Jesus made this claim for himself and it brought him into conflict with the religious and civil authorities at the time. They became utterly jealous of Jesus in the way that he taught, performed miracles and received the following of crowds of people. The final outcome was that they plotted and had him crucified, nailing him to a wooden cross until he was dead. Christians believe that three days after his death Jesus rose from the dead. He spoke with his disciples and assured them that he had conquered death. The resurrected Jesus was not a resuscitated Jesus. Although he bore the scars of crucifixion, he was different and we know that his body had changed. However the first disciples were so convinced that Jesus had overcome death that they risked everything to share the message far and wide. They led brave lives teaching about Jesus and many were tortured and killed for their faith. Yet so strong was their belief and so powerful the message, that within centuries the Roman Empire was converted to Christianity and the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian.

The most important church service is one called Holy Communion, which Jesus commanded his disciples to do in remembrance of him. In that service we remember that Jesus died on a cross and that as he

died he said '*Father forgive them*' and poured out forgiveness, even on those who crucified him. In this service we are reminded of God's great love for us his children and the forgiveness which the death of Jesus assures us of. Can you believe in a God who forgives us even when we reject him and nail him to a cross? That is what is meant when we say he 'redeemed humankind.'

What we believe about Jesus is critical as to whether or not we should call ourselves Christian. He made bold statements and said that the words he spoke and the things he did, were nothing less than the words and actions of God himself. If Jesus was telling the truth then in his life we can see what God is like. We can see that he cares for us and that he goes out of his way to forgive and help us.

Question 3

Do you believe and trust in his Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God ?

To find out about the Holy Spirit we should go back to page 1 of the Bible where we are told that the uncreated world was a dark chaotic place but out of the chaos God's Holy Spirit brought life and order and beauty. The Bible uses the word Spirit to speak about God's personal presence. In Hebrew that word for Spirit is 'Ruakh' and it means the invisible energy which makes the clouds move or trees sway or the deep breath in your lungs. God's Spirit is invisible just like wind and breath are invisible, but as wind is powerful, so God's Spirit is powerful, and as breath keeps us alive, so God's Spirit keeps us alive and sustains all of life.

God's Spirit is the way God sustains everything created that ever has been and ever will be. God's Spirit is in all people even if they are unaware, but Christians have a very distinct sense of God being within them and sharing love, guidance and peace. It is by God's Spirit that we are encouraged to serve poor people, seek justice and care for those in need. The Bible describes nine signs of the Holy Spirit bearing fruit in a person's life. As a result their faith a Christian can expect to enjoy a noticeable increase in good things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit strikingly, but unspectacularly, enriches a person's life.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus left his disciples to spread the good news of all that he had said and done. He also gave them a promise that the Holy Spirit would always be with them. Christians believe that God's Spirit is still with us today enabling the church to serve God in the world. This is what makes the church different from just another club or human organization; it is a place where Christians can come together and find God present in a special way. It is strange to think of God as three things Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the word Trinity is used to describe it. Yet although we know God in these three ways we are told that he is very much the same God. Jesus prayed that the oneness which he had with God should be in his church as well. For this reason Christians should learn to put aside differences and share together as one church.



Conclusion

Faith in God has to make sense and stand up to investigation. This does not mean that we have to be able to understand God, but if we believe that God made this world then we should not be afraid to engage in debate with science, history or reason. Faith should make sense of this world in which we live and enable us to live in a better way. Yet the purpose of faith in God is to trust and serve God, to know and love God. Terrible things might happen to us in this life, dreadful things which are not God's will at all. Things like war, cancer, death and road accidents are not the work of a loving God and it is important to understand that God does not cause them. It is a terrible thing to imagine that everything which happens is 'meant to be'. Indeed some of the terrible things we do to each other must make the heart of God bleed.

Being a Christian will not make you immune to such things, and being a Christian will not be the end of all your problems; even Jesus found himself killed and hated. However, faith in God causes us to think and behave in ways that work with the grain of the universe. Faith in God can even bring good out of terrible tragedies. It is as if we suddenly discover which way the tide is running and learn to swim with it, rather than against it. We were made to know and serve God and there can be no better way for us to live than what we were made for. We still

have to encounter difficulties, but we know that God is with us co-operating with us no matter what problems we face. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote

*‘all things work for good for those who love God.’
Romans 8:28.*

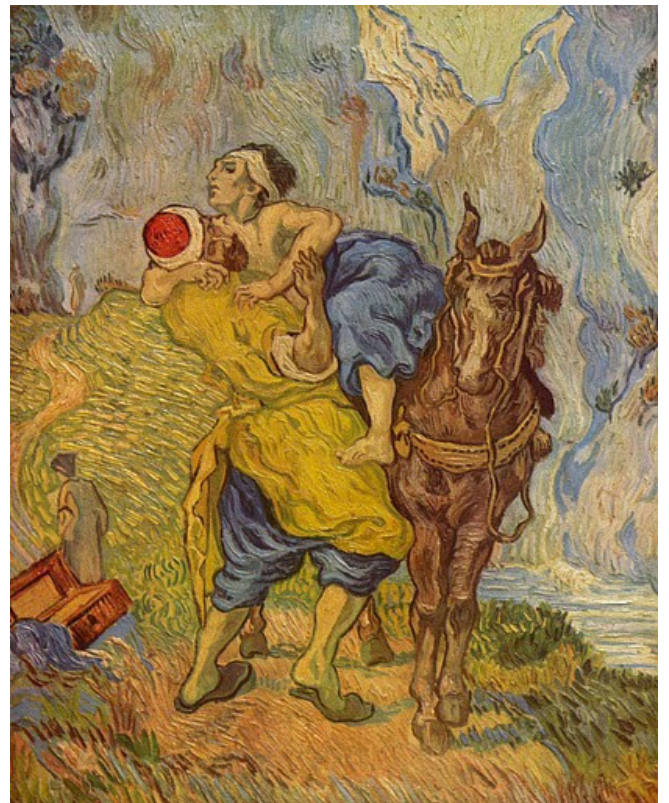
Reading the Bible

The Bible contains encouragement and consolation in times of sorrow and it has encouraged people across the centuries to live fulfilling lives. Christians and people of many different faiths value the Bible which they believe gives us important truths from God. The Bible was formed over a period of over 1,000 years and contains a wide variety of literature including history, hymns, Jewish laws and letters to young Christian churches. However it is not always an easy read and over the centuries passages from the Bible have been used to justify the murder of Jews, burning of witches and discrimination against people on the basis of their gender or sexuality. I am sometimes asked where to start reading a book which contains such complex writings from across thousands of years. My advice would be to begin with the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus, especially the parables. Nobody used parables as much or as brilliantly as Jesus did and he was such a convincing storyteller that so many of them have survived. These stories which Jesus told are as close as we can get to the authentic words of Jesus and they help us to begin to understand what God is really like. As a good place to start I hope you will find helpful a short Bible study on one of the most important parables.

The Good Samaritan

Luke Chapter 10 Verses 25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him,



The Good Samaritan
Vincent Van Gogh

and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Bible Study

When we read the Bible it is important to understand as much of the historical background as possible to make sense of what is being said. Let's look at the history and geography behind this story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is 17 miles. It drops from 2,700 feet above sea level to 800 feet below sea level at Jericho, the lowest city on earth, 200 feet per mile. It is barren, no vegetation and would have lots of places for bandits to hide.

Samaritans and Jews did not get on! Samaria had been the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel and it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C. They deported half the Samaritan aristocrats to parts of the Assyrian empire and forcibly settled other conquered people in Samaria to lessen the chance of uprisings. Intermarriage and theological differences led to a widening gap between the Samaritans and the Jews to the south. The Samaritans were excluded from worship in Jerusalem and so worshiped in their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Jews who were told this parable regarded Samaritans as mongrels, half-breeds, almost Gentiles (John 8:48). They cursed them publicly in the synagogues, and prayed that they should have no share in eternal life. Jews would not eat with Samaritans, use their drinking vessels (John 4:9), or believe their testimony in court. Rabbinic texts said that you should keep feet from a corpse. Defilement for seven days could come through touching a corpse, or what a corpse had touched, or even through the air, or a coffin. However Jews were required on religious grounds to bury a corpse and nothing, not even purity laws stood in the way of saving life. Laws were suspended when life was endangered. The victim is described

as half dead, so in either case they were obliged to help either bury him or help him!

Conclusions

Jesus is asked by a lawyer the most important question on the lips of every human being who has ever lived,

‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

Jesus throws the question back and asks the man what he thinks the Bible teaches. The lawyer responds brilliantly by bringing together teachings from what we know as the Old Testament

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’

Jesus agrees with the lawyer and tells him that this is indeed the way to secure such favour with God as to guarantee eternal life. However he is then asked who the lawyer should include as a neighbour. It is in response to this that Jesus makes clear that a neighbour can only be defined by nearness and need. Eternal life is granted by God to those who show the love of God to whoever is in need and this extends even to those you may despise for their religion or nationality or whatever else. Eternal life is not assured to those with spiritual enlightenment, religious fervour or proclamation of one creed or another, but rather to those who seek to show the love of God in acts of kindness to others.

When we read the Bible we should try to ask God to teach us what it means for us today. I understand this parable to mean that we cannot ignore the plight of those suffering. This is difficult because we do not have to travel the dangerous road, we need only turn on our TV sets. If a Samaritan is our neighbour then there are no boundaries and we must love others as unconditionally as God loves us.

Prayer

Prayer is one important way in which we grow closer to God, but many people are confused about what prayer is. Prayer is not persuading or reminding God to do something, neither is it saying magical words like 'abracadabra' which mysteriously change the course of events. Rather prayer is when we come into the presence of God, trying to look at life through God's eyes, bringing our activities under God's sovereign will. This is seen very clearly in the teaching given by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer.

If you find prayer difficult, like the first disciples, then a great place to start in prayer is by following the advice of Jesus and simply saying the Lord's Prayer. As this prayer becomes part of our daily routine so you can include other prayers. As we pray the Lord's Prayer we acknowledge God and the claim which God has over our lives. We also share God's concern and commitment for people and the world. This is a spiritual journey which will take place over many years as we seek to be obedient and grow in love of God. If you have not yet started this journey then there is no time to delay, for it is a pilgrimage in which Christ goes with us and there is no better path to follow.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayers

*Let the hurry and worry of life fall away from you.
You are God's child; he loves you and cares for you.
He is here with you now and always. Speak to him thoughtfully and
allow him time to speak to you.*

God of goodness, give me yourself. For you are sufficient for me.
If I were to ask for anything less I should always be in want,
for in you alone do I have all. *Julian of Norwich c(1342 - 413)*

O God, our true life, to know you is life, to serve you is perfect
freedom, to enjoy you is a kingdom, to praise you is the joy and
happiness of the soul. I praise and bless and adore you, I worship
you, I glorify you. I give thanks to you for your great glory. I humbly
beg you to live with me, to reign in me, to make this heart of mine a
holy temple, a fit habitation for your divine majesty.
St Augustine (354 -430)

'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless
until they find their rest in you' *St Augustine (354 - 430)*

All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things
shall be well", *Julian of Norwich c(1342 - 1413)*

Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be today. If I forget thee,
do not thou forget me Amen. *Lord Astley at the battle of Edgehill*

May the love of the Lord Jesus draw you to himself,
May the power of the Lord Jesus strengthen you in his service,
May the joy of the Lord Jesus fill your soul
May the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son,
and the Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you
and those you love this day and evermore. Amen.

If you would like to discuss further any of the information
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