

The Story of Jesus

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At the heart of Christianity stands Jesus as servant and son of God in his living and dying as well as his teaching. Christian faith is not so much belief in religious propositions as trust in a person, a person in whom God is experienced as specially near and real.

So what exactly do we know about this historical life and death? Jesus was born 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, a small Palestinian village in what is now the State of Israel, and died a few miles away in Jerusalem after a short life of around thirty years. Mostly, Jesus lived in an ordinary home in the north of the country, Nazareth in cosmopolitan Galilee. His family was of the poor artisan class and Jesus was probably a carpenter, making door frames, yokes and ploughs. This means he was even poorer than peasant farmers, for peasants at least owned small plots whereas a carpenter was landless. By all accounts Jesus was a devout Jew, learning of God primarily from his mother Mary and in the rich traditions and rituals of his people. Because Nazareth was not far from the great city of Sepphoris, he grew up in a world of different races, cultures, and religions. It is likely that Jesus spoke four languages - Aramaic and Hebrew, with a smattering of Latin and Greek. Remains of a great open-air theatre have been unearthed in Sepphoris, so this highly intelligent boy certainly wasn't living in some crude backwater.

When he was about thirty Jesus left Nazareth, becoming a disciple of John the Baptizer, a prophet calling Jews to greater fidelity to their faithful God. Baptized in the Jordan River by John, Jesus seems to have identified fully with the prophet and his revivalist mission. At some point Jesus took over John's ministry, no doubt when John was imprisoned or after he was executed. Drawing on what John had taught him and on the teachings of other Hebrew prophets and sages, Jesus also developed insights as a Spirit person in his own right. In response to what he knew God required of him, Jesus traveled the length and breadth of the land, gathering a close circle of disciples or students of his own. Clearly, he was a charismatic figure, quickly establishing a reputation as teacher and healer.

For three or four years his classroom was sometimes a natural amphitheatre in the hills around Lake Galilee, out in the fields, or on the roads they traveled endlessly on foot. Sabbath by Sabbath the little band was to be found in some local synagogue, as well as participating in the seasonal pilgrimage feasts such as Passover, offering the prescribed sacrifices in the great temple at Jerusalem.

Crowds of people followed Jesus, attracted by his magnetic personality, hanging on his words. Unlike the professional religious leaders of his day, the gospels record that Jesus taught with simple authority. Immediate and self-authenticating, his teaching was familiar, yet distinctive and compelling and memorable. People were captivated by his genius for storytelling, and in his presence felt closer to God than ever before. To be with Jesus was to be with God in a way they had longed for but never previously experienced. All this is the more astonishing when you think that Jesus held no position

of power or influence. He had no money of his own, no university degree, no social status to cling to, no political or religious office to exploit. In his whole life he traveled no more than two hundred miles in any direction. Perhaps the most extraordinary fact about Jesus is that he wrote nothing down, leaving no record of his teachings except in the lives of his followers.

Jesus was eventually destroyed by the religious and political elite of his day for disturbing their complacency and threatening their privilege. It was not ordinary Jews who rejected Jesus, but a small coterie of the great and powerful. Condemned in a Roman court by a Roman governor, he was publicly executed in typical Roman fashion as a common criminal. Nailed to a wooden cross outside the city walls, Jesus was left to die an agonising death by asphyxiation in the relentless sun. Although he loved life, he died a young man full of promise, at the height of his powers. On one level, the crucified Jesus is the helpless victim of evil, squashed like so many others before and since. In another sense, however, his death seals his life, for all the evidence shows that he dies loving and forgiving, refusing to modify the truths he embodies or in any way compromising his own integrity. It seems clear that Jesus determined at some point to face the music rather than save his own skin, as undoubtedly he could have done by slipping away into the wilderness, or leaving the country. No doubt a showdown was inevitable between the routine violence of the world and his intentional way of peace. So at the end we see him quite deliberately refusing retaliation, at no point returning evil for evil, and forbidding his followers use of brute force no matter the provocation.

But crucifixion is not the end of this story. Christianity is born not at Christmas, but at Easter, not with a Bethlehem baby, but with an event in Jerusalem. No Christian faith exists apart from resurrection, from the conviction that the dead and buried Jesus is not in fact disappearing into the mists of history. In other words, Christianity is built on experience, and a totally unexpected experience at that. Resurrection, of course, is no new idea. Many Jews of Jesus' day believed God will raise the dead at the last day, at the close of the age. What is stunningly new here is the witness of the twelve apostles that Jesus is alive here and now, that Easter preempts the end of time. Their astonishing claim is that he comes to meet them and eat with them just as before, that the crucified returns to his crucifiers not in judgment but in mercy, not to settle accounts but to embrace. In addition to the Jewish scriptures, Christians reverence particularly the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, four different versions of the story. Like our parent faith Judaism and our later sibling Islam, Christianity is what is called a 'revealed' religion, meaning it is not so much the result of human seeking as divine self-disclosure. Yet, Christianity is not a religion of the book in quite the same sense as Judaism or Islam, for the distinctive Christian conviction is that God's word or wisdom or reason never finds adequate expression in mere words. The Word does not become just more words. God speaks and the Word becomes flesh, in the mystery of incarnation. As John says on the very first page of his gospel, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth". (John 1:14) Not surprisingly, then, the gospel writers' Easter accounts read nothing like news bulletins. Each of the four struggles as best they can with bewildering experiences beyond all human categories, proclaiming what is by definition beyond the usual stretch

of human words and concepts. It seems that what happens is simply too real to be pinned down, examined, dissected and described. Resurrection is not merely resuscitation of a corpse. It is a post-mortem experience, certainly, but this is somehow entirely fresh, exploding everything we think we know. They four writers penetrate the mystery, but can never exhaust it. As the jostling resurrection appearance stories in the gospels demonstrate, God's new thing is not so much to be understood as to be lived.

The story of Jesus, celebrated and rehearsed in the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, endlessly schools Christians in faithfulness. If it is true that the crucified returns to his crucifiers, God's faithfulness wears a human face through calvary and beyond. Obviously, this belief has huge potential and power in our destructively polarized world, where religion can be peace-maker or peace-breaker. In his ministry, Jesus created and sustained the community of his friends by speech and touch and sharing of food, and after Easter his community is maintained in the same way. His church is not removed from history, from matter, from bodies and words. Being faithful as God is faithful is good news for the human family, indicating trustworthy friendship all round. Believing God is who and what we see in Jesus, trusting that God is Christlike, that in God there is no unChristlikeness at all, is summed up in the classic Christian claim: God is love. (1 John 4:8)

Questions for Discussion

- **Christians call Jesus the human face of God. Is this distinctive truth claim a barrier to dialogue with other people of faith, or an invitation?**
- **In what ways are Islam, Judaism and Christianity similar? In what ways do they differ? In what ways is honesty about differences essential to inter-faith dialogue?**
- **Christian history is as bloody as any other religious history, but can this violence be traced back to Jesus himself?**

Further Reading

James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK 1993)
Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper 1994)
Simon Barrow & Jonathan Bartley (Eds), *Consuming Passion* (London: DLT 2005)
Scott Cowdell, *Is Jesus Unique?: A Study of Recent Christology* (New Jersey: Paulist 1996)
John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM 1973)
John V. Taylor, *The Christlike God* (London: SCM 2004)
Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: DLT 2003)
N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Michigan: Eerdmans 1992)

Father David Wood *has served as priest in six parishes in two metropolitan dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia. Educated at the University of Melbourne, the United Faculty of Theology and Monash University, he has degrees in art history, women's studies and theology. Ordained by the Archbishop of Melbourne in 1979, he has been Examining Chaplain and Director of Vocations, Secretary to the Commission on Community & Race Relations of the Victorian Council of Churches, Moderator of the Summer School in Ecumenism, Executive Member of the Council of Christians & Jews, and Canon of Saint George's Cathedral Perth. Currently, he is Anglican Chaplain in the Multifaith Chaplaincy Service at Edith Cowan University in Perth, and Parish Priest of Grace Church Joondalup. Fr David's first book, Is God a Boy's Name?: Inclusive Language for the Liturgy, was published in 1991. His doctoral thesis on Christology and Christian mission in a religiously plural world was published as Poet, Priest and Prophet: Bishop John V. Taylor (London: CTBI) in 2002. More recently, Fr David wrote the introduction to the Classics Edition of J.V. Taylor, The Go-Between God (London: SCM 2004), and contributed a chapter to Simon Barrow & Jonathan Bartley (Eds), Consuming Passion: Why the Killing of Jesus Really Matters (London: DLT 2005). He writes regularly for an online institute promoting spiritual growth, The Geranium Farm (<http://www.geraniumfarm.org/home.cfm>), as well as theological journals and religious newspapers. This piece was commissioned for Project Abraham, an Australian federal government dialogue initiative between Muslims, Jews and Christians.*