

*Lord, may I speak the words you want me to speak, may we hear the words that you want us to hear. Amen*

What makes a Christian? Is it going to church on Sunday? Is it baptism? Is it believing the creed? Is it knowing what the creed means?

Or perhaps I should ask “Who makes a Christian? Is it the Vicar? Was it your parents or godparents? Is it you?”

But the most important person is surely Jesus. It is our relationship with; our response to Jesus that makes us a Christian. Our Christian life is about finding an answer to his question, “Who do you say that I am?” and acting on the answer we find.

So, who was Jesus?

Certainly, a middle Eastern Jew, born just over 2000 years ago into an ordinary family in what is now war-torn Israel.

And although he himself never wrote a book, Jesus is the subject of four written accounts of his life and assorted letters about his legacy, all written within 100 years of his birth. And in those writings, many people will recognise in Jesus a good moral teacher.

He taught *how to live in peace* with those around us, emphasising the importance of treating our neighbour as we would wish them to treat us, in stories like the good Samaritan, or in the instruction to give up a coat when asked, and to forgive people who hurt us (up to seventy times seven).

Jesus was also a *religious* teacher who taught that the love of God was far wider than previously imagined. That God was like the father in the story of the prodigal son “who met him while he was still far off and brought him home”, and knew that God’s love was for the poor, the homeless, the sick, not just the important, the wealthy and those who appeared to have got it all together.

Consequently, Jesus stood *for* justice and *against* authorities who used their power to make the lives of people worse, not better.

And above all, the gospels show that Jesus lived the life he spoke of, he was patient with his friends who were slow to understand what he taught. And he modelled kindness and tolerance by welcoming into his close circle the reviled tax collector, Matthew; many many women; and others whose backgrounds or past experiences put them outside the bounds of acceptable society.

A Christian then, is someone who lives their life with Jesus as their role model, seeking to live in love and peace with their own neighbours, and to demonstrate kindness and tolerance to all around them.

But is that all?

Because in this respect, as a good teacher who lived what he preached, he is no different from other heroes we might have: Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, or Mother Theresa, say. But no, Jesus is more than these people because he taught one other thing – that he was a flesh and bone God. And you can’t have Jesus the good moral teacher without Jesus the God. Or as CS Lewis put it

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. “

A few weeks ago, Gareth suggested in his sermon for Candlemas, that we tend to overlook Jesus the body, with dirty hair and bad breath. But I think we also have a tendency to forget Jesus the divine, the living Word, there at the beginning of the world: and focus instead on Jesus like the best version of us. We need to remember that this ordinary Jew, born into the family of a builder, lacking education, or connections,

wandering around obscure middle eastern villages followed by a rabble of people: this man was God.

I'll say that again, because it is truly shocking. This man was God.

And I want to suggest three reasons why we believe this.

Firstly, Jesus said he was. In John's gospel we can read that he taught his disciples that, "I and the Father are one" and that "who has seen me has seen the Father." To take Jesus seriously is to take these claims he made about himself seriously: to see that Jesus is much more than a good teacher.

Secondly, we believe Jesus is God because of the witness of the early Church. Those first followers of Jesus: Peter, James and John, Mary his mother, and Mary of Magdala, Mary and Martha of Bethany must have thought they had seen something more than a good teacher. The gospels tell of the disciples collecting pieces of a jigsaw. Peter may have acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah, but he probably hadn't collected all the jigsaw puzzle pieces so as to make a complete picture of Jesus, until after the resurrection, and possibly even the ascension and Pentecost. But by then, these early followers wanted everyone to know that they were, as we heard in the reading today, "eyewitnesses to the *majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ.*" All of these people uprooted their lives, "moved by the Holy Spirit to speak a prophetic message from God" and spread the good news, prepared to give everything, even their own lives, that others might come to share their understanding.

And a third reason we believe that Jesus is God himself is surely the story we have today of the transfiguration.

It's a funny word "transfiguration" – it's not really used in any other context except this one story. It sounds a lot like transformation, but I don't think that this is a story of Jesus being changed or transformed: what is changing is the way the disciples see him.

Peter, James, and John see Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah, representatives of the law and prophets, the very foundation of their knowledge of God. That reflects their initial understanding of Jesus as a man, a new hero of their Jewish faith, a moral and religious teacher.

But suddenly, they see Jesus, shining, glorious, and they see a cloud. It's all God-imagery from the OT: Peter, James and John are trying to explain a light bulb moment when they saw Jesus in a whole new way. The voice of God himself, saying, "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to Him," is not speaking to Jesus, but to the disciples. Yes, it's a repeat of the words that we heard at Jesus' baptism, but this time, they are not to propel Jesus into the start of his public ministry, they are for the disciples, to help them understand that Jesus is more than a teacher, more than a friend, more than Moses and Elijah. This man is God.

For a Christian then, it will never be enough to say that Jesus is a good moral teacher: we have to face up to the claims that he is the eternal living God come among us.

So what, if Jesus is God? Does it make any difference to what we should do? Don't we just have to follow his teaching anyway?

It makes all the difference, and again, I am going to suggest three:

If Jesus is our Lord and God, what should our attitude to him be? Yes, Jesus was a man, yes, he is our friend and brother, yes, he hears us, but we need to be careful that our attitude to Jesus does not reduce him to "our chum" or "our mate." For some of us, the traditions of the church: candles, bowing, crossing ourselves are helpful. For all of us, we need to remember that Jesus is the living God, and that we should worship Him with all our heart and mind, with all our soul and body.

More importantly, Jesus is God, and that means that what he taught about God can be relied on:

His pictures of God as loving father and mother can be relied on.

His view of the world as part of God's eternal Kingdom can be relied on.

His news that we all are welcome in the Kingdom of God, however little we feel we deserve it, can be relied on.

Lastly, Jesus is God, and that means we can have confidence in his promise to be with us forever. All that separates us from God, and from each other, our fears, our wrong desires, our distractions, are not, in the end, important. Jesus' death shows us how far God will go to make sure we know that nothing can separate us from him, not even death.

None of this would be true if Jesus were just a man, a good moral teacher.

Lent starts on Wednesday. It's a time to draw closer, to listen to God's son, the beloved. If giving up chocolate helps, do that. But otherwise, we need to try and find other ways. The notice sheet reminds us that the church is offering: Lent groups, Wednesday Mid-week communion and Friday Stations of the cross.

Or you may prefer to Read a book at home, Spend time in prayer, or ask a friend to help you reflect on how you might deepen your spiritual life.

My prayer for us all is that this Lent, we will come to add new pieces to the jigsaw puzzle that makes up our picture of Jesus, to see again that:

God came to live among us in Jesus to show us that the world is filled with his love.

Our model for life is Jesus, the perfect human, patient, kind.

We can be certain that nothing – not suffering or death – can ever separate us from the love of God.