

Who on Earth is Jesus?

“What do you think of Christ?” (Matthew 22:42).

Believe it or not, this is one of the most important questions any of us will ever be asked to answer. Our conclusions about the identity of Jesus inevitably influence the role he has in our lives, the kind of people we become and where we will spend eternity. The first disciples were confronted by the same issue. It is clear from the Biblical record that the decision was anything but easy; in fact only divine revelation enabled them to perceive the correct answer. If we wish to be relevant Christians in a rapidly changing world it is important that we know who Jesus is. There are plenty of detractors around to try and convince us otherwise.

Getting the picture

The following story is recorded in Matthew 16:13-16.

After three years of non-stop ministry to communities virtually within walking distance of his home town, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He had only been there on a handful of occasions and few people outside his immediate sphere of influence would have recognised him in a crowd. He knew he would be misunderstood (again) by people, who just couldn't, or didn't want to, grasp his priorities and message. He had enemies who were out to get him. Everything he stood for challenged their vested interests. He knew that he would be rejected by the religious establishment, betrayed by one of his best friends for the price of a common slave, handed over to the secular authorities and finally judged and consigned to judicial execution by crucifixion.

This, then, was the moment of truth. Hundreds of object lessons, thousands of miracles, since he first called the small band of disciples to follow him, now he was proposing to leave them. Did they understand who he was? Did they grasp the purpose of his ministry? Had they appreciated his mission? If not, maybe they were following him for the wrong reasons. Would they remain committed to fulfilling his plan on earth when he returned to his Father in Heaven? The paramount question, in light of the risk that they would abandon him at the moment of betrayal, was whether or not they had worked out his true identity.

In an intimate encounter he put that question to the whole group. Surrounded by the litter of pagan gods in the region of Caesarea Philippi, near the headwaters of the Jordan River and within sight of where the Greek god Pan (the Greek god of nature) was worshipped, the question was framed and put: “Whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” The common people. The priests and the lawyers. The charlatans. The decision makers. The politicians. Whom do they say that I am? What have you heard?

From the inception of Jesus' ministry people were formulating opinions about him. Some loved him and sought him out. Others came because of what

they thought he could do for them. Many were simply suspicious, suspending judgement until they could get a better picture in the light of developments. Others overtly hated him, called him names and accused him of being in league with the devil. Then there were those who feared him, this seemingly inscrutable man who could bring the wrath of the Roman authorities or zealous followers down on their heads. Love him or hate him, no one could remain indifferent. Everyone had a view. But who was right? Who and what was Jesus of Nazareth?

Not John the Baptist

The disciples seemed happy to pass on the positive images they had heard. "Some say that you are John the Baptist". John had challenged the nation with his sermons on the banks of the Jordan River. He had baptised multitudes of people who were convicted in their hearts by his preaching and wanted to wash away their sins in a rite that went back to Old Testament days. He had challenged the religious establishment, openly calling them a "brood of snakes". He must have been brave – no one ever did that with impunity. He went so far as to tell Roman soldiers how to live, how to relate to their commanding officers. John was an enigma. He was popular, but he was also potentially dangerous. Some people thought he was the Messiah, who was to come and bring deliverance to Israel. However, he had denied this emphatically. John was also a friend of the new teacher named Jesus (they were cousins on their mothers' sides), another dangerous man in the eyes of the priests in Jerusalem. Finally, John went too far. He had the audacity to take on powerful King Herod, accusing him (among other things) of committing adultery. For these affronts, Herod had him locked up in a dungeon and beheaded. There was something about Jesus that reminded the common people of John. In fact, some thought John had risen from the dead (Matthew 14:2). People who saw them together would not make this mistake, but something in the hearts of those who felt aggrieved at the murder of John (he had disciples of his own) made them prepared to transfer their allegiance to Jesus. Perhaps he was really John, raised from the dead .

Not an Old Testament prophet

"Others say that you are Elijah". Elijah was perhaps the greatest prophet in the Old Testament and his influence on the nation was profound. The Bible says that he did not die. At the end of a powerful ministry, he was caught up to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11-12). Many of his followers thought he would come back. Indeed, the prophet Malachi had foretold that he would do so (Malachi 4:5-6). There was something about the ministry and authority of Jesus that reminded the common people of the prophets of former times, who thundered across the land and declared God's messages, as though they knew him personally and were speaking for him. Jesus was audacious. When he opened his mouth it was as if though God himself were speaking. He was afraid of no one. He openly challenged the religious status quo. He spoke about judgement, fire, brimstone, death. Maybe Jesus was really Elijah, the one who had challenged the might of the Sidonian Queen Jezebel and called down fire from heaven to immolate sacrifices drenched with water

and gone on to kill the prophets of Baal and the prophets of the grove in a fundamentalist religious frenzy. But Jesus had already said that he was not Elijah (ironically, he pointed to John the Baptist as the personal fulfilment of this prophecy. People who waited for Elijah did not recognise him when he came (Matthew 17:10-13).

Was Jesus one of the other prophets then? Was he Jeremiah, the “weeping prophet” who saw judgement coming on the nation because of sin and lamented the refusal of the people to save themselves by repenting and turning back to God. Some people thought so. Was he “the” prophet about whom Moses had spoken (Deuteronomy 18:18)? Was he from God, sent with a special message to deliver them from the hands of their enemies and those who hated them? Had he come to lead them into a new era of prosperity and liberty? Of course, all this was pure speculation. No one really knew. Only a few would end up knowing for sure who Jesus was, during his life on earth. Only a few would understand the purpose of his ministry.

What about the disciples. What was their opinion? Could they come up with anything better? They must have debated this matter continuously. Otherwise, why follow Jesus at all? One by one, they looked around the circle, waiting for someone to speak. “Who am I, guys?”

The Son of God

Finally, Peter, one of the older men in the group, spoke up, “You are the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of the Living God”. Your birth has been expected for generations. Everyone has waited for this day. It has finally come. Peter stated what many of them were privately thinking. I wonder why they had not asked it before they left all and followed him. Jesus is more than a good man with a vision to carry out a particular task for God. “You are the Son of God”. It must have sounded preposterous. Either this statement was blasphemy, which Jesus should have refuted immediately (otherwise he would have totally compromised his integrity) or it is true. There is no compromise, no misunderstanding such a declaration.

Son of God? How can God have a son? Islamic scholars bridle at the idea. The Koran specifically teaches that God does not have children. The notion of incarnation (God coming in human flesh) is “too much”. Why would Almighty God humble himself by visiting our planet, made like one of us? It just doesn’t make sense. But just suppose, if God really did have a Son, and if that Son took on himself human flesh and bones, the stuff of manhood, and came into the arena of creation itself, is it possible to know him? “Show us the Father and it is enough for us”, declared an excited Thomas in the days to come. Jesus’ amazing statement said it all, “If you have seen me you have seen the Father. I and the Father are one” (John 14:9-11). It was love that drove him to do it. Love for a race condemned by sin and in need of redemption (John 3:16).

How did Peter reach his conclusion about who Jesus was? Everything in his human intellect and theological understanding recoiled at the idea. Jesus

approved of what he said and added, "You are blessed, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you. The One who has shown you this truth is none other than God the Father Himself".

Jesus stands alone in human history. I once met a man who claimed he was God. I thought he was deranged and his behaviour appeared to confirm this. But never before Jesus – or since - did God come down and live among us as a person. If we fail to grasp this aspect of who Jesus was we have missed the point. He did not come to be a good man, a knowledgeable rabbi, a paragon of godliness, but as "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). This makes Christianity different from every other faith system.

Only Jesus remains

Jesus stands with us. All the other heroes are dead. There is a sense in which even genuine heroes have use-by dates. The book of Hebrews challenges us to recognise some of their lives as examples of godly living, but leaves us flat by reminding us they were only human. Abraham is called the Father of Faith. He is an example to the church of the meaning of relationship and obedience to God. But Abraham lived thousands of years ago and his world was totally different from ours. His son Isaac, another one of the Hebrew Patriarchs, is dead. His son Jacob, in turn, returned to the dust. And so on. The disciples who gathered around Jesus on that day in Caesarea Philippi grew up with the deeds and examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets and the military might of the Macabees ringing in their ears. They were the super-heroes. But now they are gone. Only Jesus remains. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He is the "God of the Living". He is immutable; nothing about Him changes. What he said to the disciples long ago he continues to say to us.

I have stood at the grave of King David in Jerusalem. I have also stood inside an empty tomb that speaks of the greatest of them all, who rose from the dead. Not a prophet, teacher or martyr for a cause, but God incarnate. He is the Son of the Living God and we owe him our total allegiance. The thing that makes Christianity stand out from all other faiths in the modern world is that He is alive and we live in Him.