

Preface

Faith

There are so many responses to that word faith. Here are just a few examples.

I was brought up as a Christian, it always made sense, there never was a time when I never believed, it just made sense to me.

I always struggled with faith. There is just so much suffering and so many unanswered questions, so to be honest I have shelved the difficult issues and accept that faith is just that, it is faith, I just take it as is and refuse to engage with the difficult stuff.

I wish I had faith, but it's just a step too far for me. I wish there was a God as I could do with something to hang on to at times.

I have faith, but I am not sure how to describe it, as I can't put a name to what / who I believe in.

I write as someone who has faith in God, but am very keen to put a name to the God I believe in, to give that God some identity, or maybe it could be put better by saying that I want to give a face to this God. I don't expect everyone who reads what I write will say they also share that belief, and my aim is not to convert people to my beliefs, but hope that I might encourage any reader simply to be authentic in their beliefs. I, of course, could be wrong, after all faith is 'faith'; it contains belief and if I am honest any set of beliefs are also tied to our preferences, choices and perhaps even our personalities. But...

There is always going to be a 'but'! I am going to start with Jesus. I wrote above that I try to put a 'face' to God, and because of Jesus I will try to put together a picture that will describe who God (s/he) is. (I will try and use inclusive language throughout. The problem with most languages is that they heavily favour male pronouns, but if God is not a 'he' then we cannot really use male terminology for her/him; and yet if God can, in some way, be personally known, we also cannot use an 'it' language!)

Welcome to an amateurish guide to my approach to faith.

Chapter 1

Jesus, a total radical

Two aspects that are foundational to the Christian faith are that Jesus was human and Jesus was God. Although he was fully human, he was also in a unique way God living among us at a given time in history. This latter aspect describes Jesus as being 'fully God'. This event that brought us 'God in human form' is known as the 'Incarnation'. Many of the Christian creeds state these two above foundational aspects, and when we consider these two beliefs we can think it very strange, or maybe we resort to some religious language and call it 'a mystery'. And a mystery it certainly is! If we have the belief that God and humanity are so totally different it would indeed be very strange.

Okay, here comes a crazy example. If a person was fully human and fully a spider, what would that look like? Spider man? Well that super-hero is fully human and has some incredible spider qualities but we can't really say he is fully human and fully spider!

Jesus is fully God and fully human but not in the spider man sense! Two ways we resolve this conundrum. The first is that humans and God have a whole load in common. Of course there is much that is not in common, but there is something so at the core of each human that is incredibly 'God-like'. The Bible seems to affirm that, stating that that humanity is somehow 'the image of God' and made in the likeness of God. Humanity is not a replica of God, neither is God a very big human being, as one theologian put it, 'one cannot say 'God' by saying 'Man!' with a loud voice', (Karl Barth, the masculine language of 'man' represents the era when he wrote, apologies.) So, we do not assume that God and humanity are the same with the only difference being that of scale; but we are asked to assume that in some way humanity reflects God, showing us something of a picture of who s/he is. If there is a deep resemblance we can go a little way to resolving the challenge of thinking how God and human can live somehow in juxtaposition in the person of Jesus.

The second way we try to resolve the mystery is to suggest that while Jesus (God as human) lived on earth he lived it as a human, never pulling on 'super-powers' that were his because he was God. (The question of 'but what about those claims of healing?' is never used to suggest he was divine, but simply to affirm that God was with him. Nowhere is it claimed he did miracles because he was God.) This 'living as a human, living as we do' is what theologians call 'kenosis' which comes from a Greek word that means to empty oneself, or to pour oneself out. The classic biblical verses for this, that refer to Jesus, are:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8, in the New Testament part of the Bible).

This is considered to be a hymn that Paul (the writer of Philippians) quoted, so reflects a

very early understanding of the Incarnation. (The 'kenosis' verb, to empty oneself, to pour out one's life is translated in the above quote as 'he made himself nothing'.) The core meaning being communicated is that Jesus, although fully God, laid aside all his innate divine power and prerogatives in order to live as a human. There remains mystery in all this but it seems to go a long way to help us understand how Jesus could be described as 'fully God' and 'fully human'.

That way of understanding Jesus might be considered foundational, and is something I accept by faith, but let's move on to something I think is even more exciting, and perhaps even more challenging. Imagine, for a moment, growing up in a specific culture that does not share some of our values, the values that have developed over centuries. How would we think? How would we behave? I am suggesting that you think of a culture and a context far away from here, and at a different time of history. Or to bring it into the content of this book, I am asking you to think about the cultural and historical setting that Jesus was born into and lived within for approximately 33 years.

He grew up in a somewhat backward neighbourhood in an occupied land. The land was controlled by the Roman empire, and his native geography was not even that important as he did not grow up in the capital (Jerusalem), but in the peasant area of Galilee, with whole areas described as 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. The Gentiles being those who were not belonging to his race (Jews) who were the chosen people. The Gentiles were the outsiders.

In other words Jesus was a first Century Jew. Or maybe to put it a little stronger. He was a first Century biased Jew, growing up with some crazy perspectives. He had a holy book (or a set of scrolls rather than a book, scrolls that approximate to what we call the 'Old Testament'). The culture of the day, re-enforced by how the holy book was interpreted, embraced a kind of a class system, at least as far as the religious world was concerned. Two big things stand out. Women were not equal to men; and Gentiles (basically all non-Jews) were not accepted by God.

Unless we think Jesus somehow floated above his culture and drew his values directly from God it seems pretty clear that if he was 'fully human' that his values were deeply shaped by his culture. If we could have asked a young Jesus about his view of women or Gentiles we would probably have been shocked by his answers. This makes Jesus all the more remarkable, for he continually broke out beyond his culture, and one could certainly never accuse him of fitting in with the religious way of life that was expected of him! (There's a story of him at age 12 where he shocks all the adults in a temple because he goes way beyond their understanding and teaches them new things.) This way of approaching his life suggests that he was not simply 'fully human' but for the first time we see someone who was 'truly human'. Someone who modelled at each stage of life what it is to live how humans are intended to live. Jesus, whenever confronted by his own culturally conditioned bias, jumped over the specific religious and historical boundary and his response provoked a new and radical way of living. We read later that Jesus claimed that if someone had 'seen' him then they had seen God. This was an understanding that I think developed as Jesus grew in his understanding of his own identity.

Jesus develops and grows to maturity.

There are so many examples in the Bible of Jesus developing and breaking out of many cultural and religious norms. (Those stories about Jesus are in the first four books of the

New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.) Here I pick just a few stories to illustrate.

Jesus had some very key interaction with women that seems to have changed aspects of his world views. Perhaps **his own mother** (who probably became pregnant with him as an unmarried mother at around the age of fourteen) was a major influence on him. Early on in John's Gospel we read of his mother, Mary, pushing him to embrace a shift in his understanding of what he should be doing in the light of it being the right time to step up into his destiny. We read in John 2:1-7:

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

If we simply read the text it seems that Mary catalysed action. And I don't think it is going too far to suggest that his reply to his mother with the word 'Woman' was something of an initial put down. His culture would have provoked that, but the provocation of his mother's sense of destiny, meant he stepped over the cultural barrier and acted, changing his view that 'his hour had not yet come'.

John, the writer, goes on to say that the miracle of changing the water into wine was the first sign in which his glory was revealed (and I will suggest as this writing continues that 'glory' is not something spooky but is an adequate description of humanity being truly humanity.)

(A little aside although the Bible is very clear in instructing us not 'to get drunk', yet the very same term 'to be drunk' in the instruction, 'Do not get drunk on wine' (Ephesians 5:18) is the term used here in John where we read that the wine that Jesus 'made' was brought out after the 'guests had too much to drink'. Nothing very religious in Jesus' action!)

There is another story told, in both Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, concerning Jesus and his encounter with a non-Jewish woman (described as a Syro-Phoenician). Here is Matthew's version:

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

She asks that Jesus heal her daughter who was sick. The disciples of Jesus want to move her away as her persistent request is too intrusive. Jesus initially responds to her with a reply that tells her that his mission was only to Jews. She does not take 'no' as an answer. The result was the amazement in Jesus who responded saying that it was her 'faith' that astounded him. We could read the story that Jesus was provoking her to a greater level of request, but a more natural reading was that he was initially responding as a male first century Jew would. Her persistence, her faith however is what challenged Jesus to move beyond his cultural world view. I think this is the more natural reading and is reflected in the painful language Jesus used of 'dogs' in reference to those who were not Jews, but makes the huge shift after the provocation to refer to her as 'woman' once she would not leave him alone. (Matthew 15: 21-28 and Mark 7:24-30 are where we can read the story.)

Another story told that illustrates faith by someone who was not a Jew is that of a centurion in the Roman army. (We read of this in Matthew 8:5-13 and in Luke 7:1-10.) Jesus responds to heal the centurion's servant observing that he had never found such faith in anyone in Israel as he found in the centurion. The interaction with an 'outsider' must have been very instructive for Jesus, and could well have been helpful in showing him that faith always triumphed over race. (This question of 'faith' or 'race' was always a big debate for Jews. Certainly the later New Testament writings decided that no-one could claim to be 'chosen' because of ethnicity. Only the radicals at the time of Jesus thought of acceptance by God as extending beyond the Jewish people, and then they only saw it taking place by former non-Jews complying with the Jewish Law. We can legitimately ask if the interaction with the centurion and the 'SyroPhoenician' woman might have been instrumental in helping Jesus step beyond his cultural boundaries. There is one other possible element in the story of the centurion. The term 'servant' (Greek: *pais*) could also refer to a same-sex partner. Certainly not provable, but neither can it be ruled out, and given that the proportion of the Bible that seems to prohibit all same-sex activity (0.0001%) is so small, and can genuinely be interpreted in different ways, we probably have to leave this open as a possibility. Just because it is such a small percentage does not necessarily mean that is all it has to say on the subject. What we read concerning the body and sexual activity also has a bearing, nevertheless the small percentage I quote puts some of the controversy into perspective.)

The challenge of stories is we can read what is going on through different lenses. Only if we see no progression in Jesus' understanding will we read the stories as if Jesus came to the situations with a fully-developed, already maturely formed, perspective. The wider testimony of Scripture seems to suggest otherwise. We read that Jesus was made 'perfect', implying a process:

[God] should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered (Hebrews 2:10).

The term 'perfect' is better translated as 'mature', indicating a progression and growth as he lived out his life in the everyday interactions with others.

Another story that can certainly be read as a challenge to Jesus' worldview is termed 'the woman caught in adultery'. We find this one in John's Gospel chapter 8, and the opening verses. She was caught in the sexual act and was brought to Jesus by the religious leaders of the time who were called Pharisees:

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him [*my comment: accusing him of contradicting the law, and refusing to accept the authority of Moses*].

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Why write in the ground? Probably to give him time to think, but how profound given that his understanding was that humanity was created from the ground (the 'dust of the earth'). His finger was touching the very essence of humanity, and it was that contact with dust that I suggest gave him insight at that time. Dust... what we might term 'fallen' dust. Dust (humanity) that consistently failed to be 'truly' human. Even the religious people who were able to draw lines and therefore call certain people 'sinners' were silenced by Jesus' reply. Jesus no longer defined 'sin' by a set of rules, as they did, but by how we live in relation to others. (This I will write about later - the Bible describes two ways of living, describing it as 'life' or 'death'. Religion describes two ways of living, calling them 'right' or 'wrong'.)

We think a good way to engage with the above examples would be to suggest that Jesus was the 'great teacher' because he was the 'great learner'. The idea that he was born as a baby and never cried, or as a teenager who never pushed the boundaries with respect to his parents belong more to the fairy-tale Christmas hymns with lines such as:

The cattle are lowing,
the poor Baby wakes,
But little Lord Jesus,
no crying He makes.

Fully human? Not, if as a baby there was no crying. Jesus followed a developmental path physically but also emotionally and what we might term spiritually. The key element to the spiritual development is that of a path toward maturity.

Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5: 8-9).

So putting a few things together from this opening chapter I suggest these are the key take away points

We have a knowledge of who God is when we consider what we read of Jesus, particularly in his interaction with others. We consider that he was 'fully God' and 'fully human' at one

and the same time. Yet a very key part is that he also shows us what it is to be truly human... We can consider his teachings and be shaped by them and this will be of great value, and yet the Bible goes beyond simply advocating for what he taught, indicating that in some way he became a source of 'salvation'. That is an aspect that we will need to think about, but or now I will make a switch to some thoughts about what I consider is the source for our understanding about God and our account of the life of Jesus, what we term the Bible (or the Scriptures), a book full of content but not always easy to understand and interpret.

Chapter 2

The Bible

In the last chapter I suggested that Jesus was so far ahead of his culture and setting, and that his holy book (set of scrolls) both helped to shape his life and thoughts and at the same time restricted his progress. And of course this is something we have to consider also when anyone who is a Christians reads their holy book, the Bible, consisting of Old and New Testaments. It is a more-than-amazing guide but can also restrict our progress if we mis-read it or mis-judge what it is and its purpose.

If we simply took everything we read within the Bible and tried to make it all make sense we would certainly end up with a headache! There are also some serious problematic areas that we encounter when we read the text. What are we to make of situations where God wiped people from the face of the earth, such as with the flood? Or texts that report that God commanded all men, women and children be killed? Those are certainly difficult texts to read (an understatement!).

I have always found that trying to understand how Christians have wrestled with how the Bible seems to endorse slavery as being very informative. (And the slavery the Bible reflects is perhaps more similar to that of what might be termed historic slavery. Modern slavery continues at many levels, from human trafficking to so much of modern economic practices and trade, for example, the clothing industry.) In the pages of the Bible we find that slavery is all-but encouraged! It suggests that God 'blessed' people by increasing the number of slaves they owned; we do not read of Jesus at any stage challenging the institution of slavery; and a follower of Jesus such as Paul, who wrote so much of what we term the New Testament, commanded slaves to be obedient! Most Christians today read those verses and sub-consciously dismiss them as irrelevant for us, and also accept that slavery is an abuse and should be opposed at all levels.

We all-but delete the verses. Delete verses from our holy book! The verses are not an issue to us as they do not apply to our everyday life. But if we go back a century or more they were an issue and Christian slave owners were very confident that they were right as they had the Bible on their side! Those who were Christians and believed in abolition did not have the Bible as **a book** on their side, but they believed they had the Bible as **a story** on their side. What do we mean by this?

They knew the Bible was written into a culture and was a historic book, but within it there was a trajectory, a direction, a movement toward something, and sometimes the goal of the trajectory was beyond the pages that are read. I think this concept of a trajectory is ever so important.

Taking the example of slavery we mentioned, the abolitionists understood they could make a strong defence of their position by appealing to the creation stories where people were made in the image of God; that any subjection of a person to another person came after things went off-track; that Jesus called us to love our neighbour as ourselves; that Paul encouraged a slave who could obtain freedom to do just that; that he returned a slave to his owner (we read of this in the book of Philemon in the New Testament) saying he was returning the slave as a family member. And finally those who believed in abolition appealed to the

direction that they understood was set in motion by the Scriptures. The good news (technically called 'the Gospel') that results from the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus meant that there was no longer 'slave nor free' (a direct quote from Galatians 3: 28) and as far as possible that reality should be reflected in the life of Christians and also society. Their appeal then was to the trajectory that Scripture seemed to indicate. They did not read the Bible as simply a set of verses that could be glued together, and were willing to go beyond what they read in the actual pages.

Let's try to suggest a way of looking at the overall story, that will help us see that there is a movement forward, and ultimately when there is a conflict within the pages of the Bible themselves between a restrictive path or a freedom path, with the latter will have to be the direction we lean toward. That always seems to be the direction Jesus moved in, and at one level he contradicted his holy book at times, for he could say 'You have heard it said', and then quote from a holy scroll, but then he would go on to say 'But I say to you'. We can suggest he contradicted the text, but we can also say he followed the trajectory.

If we were to suggest that the overall story could be compared to a play set in a series of acts, with some of the individual stories and verses then relating to a specific act we could do it like this:

Act 1. The stories of creation, where the key characters are presented. There is no need to take these stories as literal in the sense of this is what really took place. It is not something that the writers seem to suggest, for they were surely well aware that they wrote of specific days passing before there was a sun and a moon! They also join together two stories that don't harmonise at every point. We should give the writers (editors?) respect by acknowledging they were well aware of this and deliberately gave us two versions of the beginning of things, of this 'creation project'; one version for one profound story was not sufficient to give us the insights that would be helpful to us.

What do we learn from these stories? We read of the God who 'created', and can understand certain aspects of what makes that God 'tick'. High on that list has to be the generosity of God. God gives a wonderful setting to humanity and encourages them to eat of 'all the trees of the garden'. We are not presented with a list of restrictive prohibitions, solely of one restriction. The emphasis is on generosity, but within it the story contains one element where a choice has to be made. Although not quite accurate the choice exposes what 'sin' is. We read that the woman described the forbidden fruit as appealing to something inside her, and that she 'saw', 'desired', 'took' and 'ate'. Words that sum up consumerism, not just in terms of how today's culture defines it, but when applied beyond material things, a consuming culture that will even take life from someone else and consume it though treating others as objects existing for our benefit, rather than see ourselves as being present for others. It is not surprising that this is the heart of 'sin', it is to live in a way different to the generosity of God. Many other ancient creation stories have humanity obliged to produce food for the 'gods'; the Genesis stories have God providing food for humanity. If humanity is made in the image of God, to sin is to fail to image God. We should not think of 'sin' as a list of 'do not's', but as a way of life that is less than being in the image of God. In the words of Paul in Romans,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

To sin (a universal experience) is to 'fall short of the glory of God'. In John's Gospel we read that when the life and person of Jesus was examined that his glory was visible.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1: 14).

Jesus was fully and **truly** human, he reflected God and he showed us what constitutes true human life. He did not 'fall short of the glory of God', but showed God to us, and that glory was full of grace and truth. There was truth that showed through in his life, sometimes it came forth and his words made people (and continue to make us) uncomfortable, but it is almost as if the truth that came was inside the container of grace (love, favour expressed that is not deserved).

Act 2 consists of the next chapters of Genesis through to chapter 11. Classically this is called 'the fall' but given that there are many aspects outlined that go wrong we might be better to call it a series of falls. Again there is no need to accept this as an historical account, for what is more important is to grasp what is being put across. It's really a kind of analysis of what needs to be fixed. We read a summary list of what is out of sync. Right up front we are presented with a God / human problem. The problem is primarily one of perception, how God is viewed. God is viewed as restrictive and self-protective, hence it is deemed better to create one's own path. The result of that is guilt, but a primary manifestation is that of shame. A low (and wrong) self-image.

Then the list just piles up. Damage to and tension within interpersonal relationships follow, with distortions to male / female relationships with a society where patriarchy will tend to dominate. The tensions continue: within the family (Cain murders Abel) or among the nations, and there is even a strange story that indicates a lack of harmony between the spiritual world and the material world.

So in these two acts we have a great start to what might be termed God's 'creation project' but an acknowledgement that it is not moving in a right direction, this not being due to the nature of God but to the choices of humanity. We see something more about the character of God as we move into Act 3 in as much as God does not give up but works toward a solution to our problem.

Act 3 takes up a lot of the Bible and we can give it a one word heading 'Israel'. It really fills the rest of the Old Testament and also occupies some of the early stories of the New Testament; Israel also remains as part of the historical background to the New Testament era, and is a significant part of the theological background.

This act begins with Abraham being 'called' while he is at the centre of the civilised world of his day, 'Ur of the Chaldees'. From there he embarks on a journey as a nomad and travels the (literal) opposite direction to the people movements of his day. He is 'chosen' not to damn all others but so that all families of the earth might be blessed. A later text says of Israel that they were chosen as a unique people and designated as 'a holy priesthood' (Exodus 19: 5,6). Most theologians understand that the Adam and Eve story presents them as priests, to represent God to creation and to represent creation to God, to live as intermediaries; this then is the calling of Israel - to represent God to the other nations and to

represent the nations to God. Maybe we could put it like this; they were to see their task as helping the world be the best it possibly could be.

If we put it in this context we can understand that being chosen is not to do with defining the classic lines of who is in and who is out; who is saved and who are damned. Rather the question that is put to us is 'chosen to do what', and as the calling of Abraham and his descendents (Israel as a faith nation) comes immediately after the list of 'the mess that needs to be cleaned up' it is natural to read the choice of Abraham as being God's response to the mess. It is, in simple terms, 'Abraham, come help me clear up the mess'.

The stories that unfold make a fascinating read, with more turns and twists than the average soap opera! Some key points do unfold. One of the most significant turning points is when Israel asks that they too could have a king, so that they might be just like one of the nations. Given they were always meant to be different, to be living for the other nations, this call for a king has tragic consequences. In big theological terms it means that the 'redeeming' nation will eventually also need to be 'redeemed'; the doctor chosen to administer the cure ends up incapacitated through catching the disease they were seeking to cure.

The stories relating to John the Baptist strongly have Israel as the backdrop. He baptises at the river Jordan, the same place where Israel had entered the 'promised' land. He is calling for a restoration of Israel, and is very dismissive toward some of the religious leaders of his day. When they came out to see what he was up to, he was certainly not flowing in the 'how to make friends and influence them' stream. He was less than polite:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham (Matthew 3: 7-9).

The 'coming wrath' is typical of the language of the prophets of the Old Testament. They had a world view that when the special nation (Israel) was no longer living up to her true identity that a foreign nation would come and punish them. They called this the 'wrath of God'. He also very typically rebukes them for thinking that they were safe because of who their 'father' was. For those prophets ethnicity counted for little, what counted was being faithful to God.

John the Baptist appears at a watershed moment, as a door opener to a greater era. That greater era (often called the kingdom of God) in relation to John was summed up by Jesus:

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:11).

John then starts to close the door on a former era and open the door to a new era. That new era we describe as the next act.

Act 4 is concerning the life of Jesus. He comes as the promised Messiah. Although there seems to be a few different expectations among Jews as to what kind of Messiah will come, there certainly was a strong view for many that he would come to restore the good old days, hence he is described as the 'son of king David'. When David (and in the subsequent reign of his son, Solomon) was king Israel was one of the most dominant of the nations in the

ancient world. Strong in battle, expanding her territory, prosperity was in abundance. The good old days! (However, internally there were seeds of division, a wealthy class and a poor class began to develop... and more importantly, Israel found an identity in herself as an important nation, losing sight of the gift she was to be to the other nations.)

The expectation was that the Messiah would deal with the major presenting problem. He would come to rid the land of the oppressive Roman regime and restore Israel as a sovereign nation. Salvation was not primarily thought of as a 'spiritual' or personal experience but would be experienced politically and corporately. This is why we should not spiritualise some of what read in the Gospels. A verse that has been taken to mean 'Jesus saves my soul' such as in Matthew 1: 21 applies not in that way but to the historic people of Israel in their historic setting. We read,

[Jesus] will save his people from their sins.

The Old Testament was very clear. Follow God and you will be blessed as a nation; go your own way ('sin', fail to live up to being Israel) and you will be punished, your relationship with the land will be broken. That was the situation that John (and Jesus also) addressed. We need to read a good proportion of the texts in the context they were written to, and the promise is that Jesus will 'save' (politically) his people (Israel) from the situation that has resulted from their sins.

So much more could be said but let's move on to **Act 5**. This is an interesting one as it takes up the story after the resurrection of Jesus with the early part of 'the act' applying the 'Jesus event' to the immediate Jewish situation; the latter part indicating that there were implications into the dominating and oppressive world of the Roman Empire. And it clearly leaves this act as unfinished, leaving us with an invitation. The invitation being, 'come on board and join this movement to see the world transformed', or if not transformed, in a better state once you depart this life to how you found it when you were born. Quite an invite!

Narrative, story. The nature of story means we cannot simply quote a set of texts, as some of what we read might not be relevant for us. (What we read might educate us, but some texts cannot be used to forcibly apply us directly.) Given that the story is unfinished we also have to try and work out where the trajectory is headed. Challenging, but also liberating! It also means that someone might think the trajectory moves toward a different point than I do. (Later I will look at what I consider is a guiding principle as to what the direction of the trajectory is.)

A long chapter... If you have managed to stick with it I hope you have picked up how the Bible both guides and instructs us, but if we read it a certain way it can actually imprison us.

Chapter 3

All roads lead to Rome

In the first chapter we tried to give some insight to the person of Jesus as a true radical who was the great learner and moved beyond his cultural norms and also beyond a wooden interpretation of his holy scrolls. This approach hopefully portrayed how remarkable he was. Almost equally remarkable is the traction that the message concerning Jesus gained during the decades that followed the death of Jesus, particularly when we consider the message itself and the historical context.

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, did not comply with expectations and was too far out of the box to be accommodated. He probably avoided being in the capital (Jerusalem) too often as he knew that would simply mean trouble for him. But in his final year, at the Jewish festival known as Passover, he took a deliberate journey to Jerusalem. Through a member of his inner core (Judas Iscariot) he was betrayed so that the Jewish religious authorities could put him on trial, and subsequently hand him over to the Romans. Finally it suited them (Israel and Rome) to have him crucified. Suited the Jews for they were brought up to believe that anyone hanging on a tree was cursed by God, and their trial had basically sentenced him as a blasphemer, who had brought the name of their God into disrepute. Likewise it was convenient for the Romans to have him crucified. Jesus' popularity meant that it could overspill into an open rebellion against them, and as crucifixion was reserved for a certain class of person, including insurgenists it sent out a clear message to all. Step out of line and this could be your fate.

The message that Christians (Jews who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah) had some serious obstacles to overcome if it was going to be received. The obstacle within the Jewish context was understood to be a 'scandal' by early communicators. If Jesus was crucified, not only did he not drive the Romans out but they had silenced him, so his claim to be Messiah seemed to fall at the first hurdle. He could not even be seen as some kind of martyr as that could not be accredited to a blasphemer.

The Roman context was equally hard. The message, if we were to summarise it, was that a certain Jewish person had been crucified in an obscure eastern province of the Empire and as a result it was now clear that the Emperor of Rome was an illegitimate ruler, that a whole new era had begun and that salvation was no longer offered by the Emperor but could only be found in Jesus. (We will expand this summary later, but the above suffices to show that Paul considered that the message was 'foolishness' in the mind of the Romans.)

When we put the message (I will often refer to it as 'the Gospel' from now on) in the two contexts we have briefly outlined above it is remarkable that it made any inroads at all!

To illustrate the Jewish context we can look at the life of one who was to become the most influential writer and thinker in the era following that Passover time when Jesus went to Jerusalem. He was trained, and excelled in his training as a 'Pharisee'. The Pharisees were very studious concerning the laws that God had given to Israel. They knew that if Israel was disobedient they would suffer consequences, and they happily used the term 'the wrath of God' to describe what would happen. The era in which Paul lived was already acutely difficult. Israel was not a free nation, they did not possess as much territory as they believed

God had promised them, and there was the ever present presence of the Roman occupying forces reminding them that they were anything but free. It seemed to these Pharisees that the nation was already receiving the wrath of God. And now! Now there were Jews who were aligning themselves to a blasphemer, claiming that he (Jesus) was the promised Messiah. If God was angry before, the result of this 'sin' could only multiply the wrath of God.

Paul took on himself a task that meant he would do the right thing (in his language, the language of religion, he would be righteous). He would make all these renegade Jews who were making these claims about Jesus come back into line. So in the capital he went from house to house to track down who they were. He subsequently got permission from the religious hierarchy to travel north to the city of Damascus to continue his work of cleaning up the mess that this upstart religion (or maybe we would be better to describe it as a sect) had made.

Paul was no push over. Something remarkable happened to him en route to Damascus. If it was not a genuine encounter with heavenly realities it must have been something very strong that someone placed in his drink! Although, of course the second option is given jokingly, it is hard to come up with an alternative other than Paul himself believed ever so strongly that he had been short circuited in his (righteous) pursuit by Jesus himself. That certainly is the version he stood by and spoke of it in numerous religious and political settings, risking his own life in the process. The shift is so enormous that he was blind for three days when he finally arrived in Damascus. Surely there is a parallel there with the three days that the Bible says Jesus was in the grave. He lost physical sight, but I think he also lost total sight of what was going on and over the three days had to come to terms with what had taken place. If Jesus had been raised from the dead (after all no one ever produced a corpse and there were hundreds who testified that they had physically seen him) then something momentous had happened. As a good Pharisee he believed that all faithful Jews would be raised from the dead at the 'end', the time when God finally established true order and restored Israel to their rightful place. The shock was so great that he no longer considered his zeal for God was a sign of righteousness but a sign that he was the blasphemer! There are two letters to a person called Timothy that either Paul wrote, or someone close to him wrote. In the first letter we read:

Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man (1 Timothy 1: 13).

The irony cannot be missed. He previously saw himself as righteous and zealous, acting on behalf of God. After his Damascus road experience he understood that he had been so presumptuous in seeking to represent God that he had totally misrepresented him. There is a debate whether we can call Paul's experience a conversion, as in a conversion from one religion to another, or a redefinition of what he perceived was his call. What does seem certain is that his former religious framework was turned totally upside down, and he had to redefine everything in the light of what he had experienced.

In the next chapter we will look a little more at the Gospel message, but the last few paragraphs should illustrate why it was considered to be a 'stumbling block', an 'offence' to the Jewish audience. Now what about the Roman world?

Like many people I was taught some Roman Empire history at school, and coming from the

UK, the only association made with the word 'Caesar' was that of Julius Caesar and his conquests. Among Christians there are concerns that perhaps the Bible predicts that there will be a 'one-world government' ruled over by an 'antiChrist'. Whether the Bible predicts that or not can be debated, but the reality is that the only time a great majority of the world was ruled over by someone who received the accolades of 'saviour' and 'lord' was during the era of the Roman Empire. This Empire was the setting where the philosopher, teacher, evangelist (and political visionary) that we encounter in the New Testament, Paul, took to bring his message.

For a moment step back with me to consider how challenging that was. Somewhere toward the core of that message was this. A Jew, named Jesus, was sent by God, was recently crucified in Rome but God has raised him from the dead, Caesar is not the Saviour and Lord but this person, Jesus, is. As a result everyone needs a change of mind-set, believe the story being recounted and therefore live by a different set of values, indeed in grasping the message understanding that there is already a new creation present.

A message that begged a response of, 'You're kidding me surely!' A message spoken into a totalitarian context, and a message that claimed that, although literally thousands of Jews had been and would be crucified by the Romans, the death of this Jesus of Nazareth was totally different.

If we have grown up with the Bible we probably think of the contents as outlining a way of living, maybe summed up as 'do unto others as you would wish them do to you', or if our background is more aligned to the 'born again' variety of Christianity then maybe we have assumed it is a message about how sinful people are and how they need to repent and be forgiven. However, it would have been very interesting to know how someone like Paul was understood when he came to major civilisation centres throughout the Empire.

We get some insight of how the people of Thessalonica heard the proclamation from what is recorded in Acts 17. They somehow knew that these people (referring to Paul and his partner Silas) had been travelling throughout the Empire (the writer uses the Greek word *oikoumene*, which was a common term for the inhabited world of the Roman Empire) and in so doing they were causing trouble for,

They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus (Acts 17: 7).

At the centre was a counter-Caesar (Caesar being the title for the Emperor) message. This shows that the message was understood to be political in nature, or at the very least opponents did not dismiss it as simply an obscure religious message. I think that when we read the reaction it seems clear that there was a very strong anti-establishment political element and a strong spiritual element to the Gospel being proclaimed.

None of this should surprise us as the language used was, either deliberately or by default, the language that was common within the Empire. We have already mentioned 'saviour'. Caesar was proclaimed as that for he had saved many people and cities from certain destruction. He was a deliverer and as such was declared to be 'lord' and 'king of kings'. From our school days we probably recall the Latin phrase, the 'Pax Romana', with the great claim that Rome had brought peace. Even the term 'son of god' was a designated term given

to each new emperor who came to the throne for they were the son of the previous emperor who had achieved divine status. Paul seemed committed to starting churches throughout the places where he visited, but the very word for church, *ekklesia*, was the name that was already in use to describe what we might term the governmental city council.

All of the above titles that were ascribed to Caesar were ones given to Jesus! The clash was inevitable, the debate raged as to which news was real and which was fake!

The differences also were enormous. Rome had brought peace, but the temple of peace in Rome said it all. It was built on Mars hill - the hill named after the god of war! Paul claimed that Jesus had brought peace, but through his own death not through taking the lives of others. Even some of what Paul wrote was very tongue-in-cheek. Nero, who was a very oppressive ruler, made the claim that he was so benevolent and had brought about such a harmonious society that he did not even need to use any force to keep things ticking along. Paul (cheekily) said to the followers of Jesus in Rome at the time when Nero was the emperor that they had better toe the line because rulers bring out the sword to insist on it. To imagine that Paul was endorsing Caesar's rule through what he said is ludicrous, rather he is calling out the hypocrisy of Nero's claim. A few years after writing that it is highly likely that it was under Nero's reign that Paul himself was killed. A political clash indeed.

Without doubt the Gospel (and the Empire used that term (*euangelion*) to declare the ascension of a new emperor, yet another clash!) caused all kinds of problems for the status quo, and it was no surprise that Paul's message was not too popular with many people, especially those whose position was tied up with the success of the Empire. But there was a crazy scenario that gives us another window of sight into some of the wider dynamics. A major city in the Mediterranean world was the city of Ephesus. It was a major centre for trade and religion and also became a centre for Paul to disseminate his understanding, so much so that it spread throughout a whole Roman province (the province of Asia). He rented a hall and gave lectures there over a two year period. If we already have a Christian background we probably now have to think outside the box. He did not rent it to encourage the singing of a few hymns and listen to a sermon being preached, but almost certainly there was a communication of his vision for the future of the world that he knew.

We read about a riot that ensued directly as a result of Paul's message (Acts 19:23-41). The objections to what he had caused in the city were tied to religion, with the accusation that Paul was discrediting one of their main goddesses; likewise the challenge to the economics of the city were such that one of the main tradespeople in the city (the jewelry trade) were very vocal among the rioters, fearing that their trade would take a downturn. (A little sidenote: there is often a corrupt connection between money and religion, and sometimes money becomes the religion; whenever there is an uproar about such issues it seems to be an indication that cultural shifts are on their way.)

Paul is blamed for the problems in the city; another indication that his message was a whole lot more than about private faith and ethics! He, being something of a super-hero, suggested that he simply went into the arena, explained everything and sorted it out. We read that those who were with him, those who were aligned to his message and had made a commitment to Jesus, resisted him and 'would not let him' appear before the crowd (Acts 19:29). Although they probably had to fight to resist him their resistance is not a surprise, as they did not want him to lose his life. They valued him, for after all he had introduced them to

faith and was, in their eyes, an indispensable mentor and teacher.

Let us now quote what is recorded, for when we push back behind the reference there is quite a backstory that pops out.

Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater (Acts 19:30, 31).

That four letter word 'even' tells a story! First, it indicates that they are almost certainly not 'disciples', they were not (in our language) 'Christians'. Second, they are 'officials of the province', or what were known as 'Asiarchs'. The Asiarchs were the Roman representatives who governed the province; they were part of the elite who prospered both economically and position-wise through the system, and were there to maintain the status quo. They are the last people in the region that one would have expected to have had any sympathies with Paul and his message, and if they had had sympathies with him the most likely response would have been that of silence. It was clearly perceived that Paul was more than rocking the boat, he was totally disrupting the social structures, and the big losers, if his message did gain a level of popularity, would have been the very ones we read of here who were 'friends'. Perhaps a current example would be of a neo-liberal entrepreneur who was part of the proverbial '1%' being friends with a 'tax the wealthy' socialist economist. Not likely bed-fellows!

In this wealthy and powerful city something must have taken place behind the scenes to get the attention of the elite. This also suggests that the daily discussions in the 'hall of Tyrannus' must have covered much more ground than simply topics concerning spiritual matters. The Gospel was an announcement of 'good news' for the world and had a whole vision for the transformation of society. That vision must have been so profound that the elite saw something in Paul's 'eyes' and heart that indicated that the world would be so much poorer off if he was to die. The above window begs a huge question concerning the Christian community as we know it today. That question being how faithful to this 'good news' has it been?

Chapter 4

The Message

Today we have the book we call the Bible, consisting of Old and New Testaments. There are genuine questions concerning the make up of the books, why some are included and other writings were not. Huge discourses have been written concerning that. And such discussions are far beyond the scope of this book, not to mention beyond the intellectual prowess of the current author! The above difficult question we simply dodge, and get right into a quick guide as to how we read what has been (more or less) accepted that has meant to guide the Christian faith.

The Bible assumes the existence of God. There are no great discussions but right at the outset it simply says that 'God spoke'. S/he speaks therefore s/he is! Presented as a generous being who shares with humanity, giving choice and autonomy, and inviting humanity into partnership for the future well-being and enjoyment of creation. In story-form (and I probably should have bitten the bullet and just used the word 'myth') there were two main trees in the garden of Eden. One was the 'tree of life' indicating that humanity was made for eternity (not indicating that humanity is immortal, that being a later Greek, Platonic concept), and one that if eaten would result in 'death'. This word 'death' is much more than a reference to something physical but something deeply personal and emotional, something corporate-wide, and something even cosmic-wise.

Two deeply contrasting words, but words we can relate to. We have all said something along the lines of, 'I really came alive when...' And the 'when' becomes, in some measure, 'I was doing what I was born to do', or as the Spanish graphically describe it, 'when I was in my salsa' (sauce). Death is just the opposite, and we have probably all had experiences when something inside of us has 'died'.

Digging a little deeper into the forbidden tree, and remembering that the encouragement was to eat of all the trees, just avoid the fruit from this one tree. Humanity is instructed to avoid this one tree for the consequences of eating from it will be the release of a flow of death to one and all. That tree was named as the 'tree of knowledge of good and evil', and the temptation was to eat of it as it was thought that it would give us the ability to draw the lines, deciding what is right and what is wrong. Rights and wrongs! There are some pretty much accepted rights and wrongs, and that is both helpful and understandable. But when we move beyond those basic agreements so much of the 'right and wrong' paradigm results in divides, and for sure the world of religion has perfected the use of that paradigm.

It seems to us that the original paradigm was not to decide what was right and wrong but to search out the path that brings life, life not simply defined as being in one's salsa (important as that is) but how to respond so that we enable those we come into contact with to come increasingly into their salsa.

Although as we read further in the Bible we encounter Israel and how they received the law we should not think that this was as simple as a list of 'rights and wrongs'. There is a key instruction that came through the person attributed in bringing them the 'law' that says,

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set

before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live (Deuteronomy 30: 19).

Life and death were two possibilities, with the encouragement to choose the path of life. The law simply was an (inadequate) guide to what that path might look like. A helpful path as it instructed how to live well within society, how to respond to one's neighbours. Yet not a perfect guide. We see this with the instructions about the death penalty, where it worked on the basis of 'an eye for an eye'. That remains an ongoing principle where the punishment is to fit the crime, but not go beyond it. However, we also read that God responded directly to the first murderer (Cain who murdered his brother Abel) by protecting him so that others would not take vengeance against him. God did not comply with his own law, or better put, the law (God gave) did not comply with God. There is no need, when we read the laws in the Old Testament, to simply take them as we read them, but again to see them as signposts pointing in a direction, that direction being the path of life.

Over many centuries it would seem the Jews lost sight of the 'life and death' paradigm and elevated the 'right and wrong' paradigm, with many discussions on how the law should be applied (such as how far one can walk on the Sabbath day). They moved away from seeing the law as being a servant to help us discover the path of life. If the above comment seems a little hard on 'the Jews', it is only because their response simply helps us see what is a universal tendency; we lose sight of the 'life and death' paradigm.

Let's jump ahead to consider Jesus and in particular his death. We have already said that his death on a cross satisfied the Jews, as it indicated a just punishment for a blasphemer, and it satisfied the Romans, sending out a clear signal that all were to comply with their customs and laws. But it runs deeper than simply an act at a specific time in history. It occurred at a precise time known, by the biblical writer Paul, as 'the fullness of times'.

Backtracking... Abraham and the nation of Israel were chosen to enable the other nations to be the best they could be, but they became self-obsessed, simply wanting to be as one of the other nations. The choice of a king (Saul being the first, with the next two, David and Solomon, perhaps being the best-known ones) was very critical in the history of the nation of Israel. The result was a hierarchy with the major flow of resources being to the centre and to the 'top', rather than a distribution of wealth and authority throughout the land. By the time of Jesus the religious leaders claimed they had 'no king other than Caesar'. If the nation that was meant to be different, so that others could see, learn and imitate, was just the same as all the others, all possibility of Israel being an agent for change had gone. This seems to be what the term 'fullness of times' means. The time when there was no hope for the future.

Jesus' birth was announced as good news for the world:

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests (Luke 2: 14).

Peace to the world. Not the Pax Romana where there was a wealthy centre and a powerful elite, who promised benefits... benefits if one complied! Peace on earth, or in the Hebrew language, *shalom*, something very positive, much more than the absence of war, and much more than peace imposed through military means.

We consider the best way to describe the death of Jesus is that it was in some strange way

a roadblock to the path that we were all on, that dead-end street. Somehow God was in Jesus saying enough is enough. It is almost as if the tree (the cross) that Jesus died on was that very tree of 'the knowledge of good and evil'. He said enough to the divides, the lines that push people away; the cross (or maybe the resurrection of Jesus) was the announcement of a new time, a new humanity, a new trajectory, a new guiding system. Or maybe an old guiding system brought back into view - the 'life and death' paradigm.

Of course all the above takes a measure of faith to accept, and I am simply presenting my faith concerning the death of Jesus, accepting that if it be true that the above will not totally explain what took place at the cross. We do however reject any idea (such as was common in many religions) that God had to be placated, had to be satisfied in order to forgive us of our many sins!

The announcement at the birth of Jesus, the life of Jesus right through to the resurrection (and beyond), was to bring hope to the world. In the last chapter we looked a little at Paul and how the message gained traction in the Roman Imperial world, and it had to be that it was essentially a message of hope. It might have been dismissed as wishful thinking, or an impossible dream, but it certainly could never be reduced to mean 'private faith expressed in religious activity'.

Beyond Jesus we have the initialisation of the *ekklesia* (translated as 'church', but the problem is we know what church is and therefore project back into the Bible that what we know must be what was being encouraged to grow throughout the then known world). This *ekklesia* consisting of people who willingly lined up under the person of Jesus to live for the prosperity and well-being of all others, so that the world might be as good as it could be, and where all could benefit from the belief that God is generous beyond belief, that each human being carries some reflection of God ('image').

Practical questions are provoked by the Person of Jesus, and the message of the Gospel. How we answer those might differ among those who claim to align to Jesus and take the Bible as a written source of authority. On some issues I am far from clear, but I think it is time to draw the 'theoretical underpinnings' to a close. To summarise what I have proposed that should inform anyone trying to articulate some answers to the practical questions, I suggest the following:

- There has always been a generosity in God, a pouring out of life for others. There has never been any act, and with that I am particularly thinking of any sacrificial act, that has brought God round to loving us. Love is the nature of the God described in the Bible.
- Jesus 'emptied himself', poured out his life and in doing that showed us the nature of God. He was fully human and yet also fully God. The third aspect I wrote about ('truly' human) we do not share with him. In that he shows us what we are to be. At no point did Jesus sin, but he developed and grew to maturity, pushing through every cultural barrier.
- Those who align with Jesus are to reflect that generosity; growth toward true humanity is to act in a way that humanises all others.
- We cannot and should not quickly wade in with proclamations of what is right and wrong but have to use the measurement of what brings life and what brings death.
- We should not simply look to the Bible as a text book but as a story, that outlines a

journey past, and points to a journey beyond its pages. We have to seek to follow the trajectory even if it seems to conflict with certain texts. Compliance to the story takes precedence over a blind obedience to the text.

- We have to think of a whole new way of society relating together as being descriptive of the outworking of the good news coming into our world as a result of the birth of Jesus, understanding the Gospel as containing much more content than aspects of personal devotion and private faith.
- We might not get it all right; and I suggest that perhaps it is not so important that we get it right. We are all involved in a journey; 'life' not 'right' has to guide; 'love' not 'vested interest'.

Religion in all its forms might have some helpful input to the journey, but religion, regardless of how it is defined, will fall short of (of course my perspective) what we can see was initiated when Jesus was born. A baby entered the world. And God entered the world at a whole new level to journey with imperfect people. People who don't know all the answers but can seek to humbly make a few suggestions and contributions.