

Jesus

At the very heart of the Christian faith is a man – not church buildings, creeds, rules and regulations, or even the Bible. Jesus is not merely the *founder of Christianity*, but the person it is all about. Almost everyone is fascinated by him – even people who are hostile to the Church find something strangely attractive about him. So, who was he, and what did he do and say that has earned him this unique place in history?

3 years

Palestine in the CIAD was very much like a modern country under foreign occupation. There were foreign troops in the streets and local guerillas in the hills. There was forced labour and the occasional violent incident. Palestine was one small part of the huge Roman Empire which straddled the world. Roman rule was harsh, and the Roman peace an iron-handed affair. The Jewish people lived in great discontent, grumbling at humiliation and high taxes, but not able to do anything about it. Then someone appeared among them who shifted the balance of power, not only for Palestine, but for the whole of history afterwards, and he was only in the public eye for about three years.

He taught and preached in a piece of country about 125 miles (200 kilometres) long and 50 miles (80 kilometres) wide.

His early life was hidden. His home and upbringing were peasant. He had very little formal education. He worked with his hands.

As far as the authorities were concerned - both civil and religious - he was just a number, although inconvenient enough to have to be got rid of. So they put him down in the thorough way they did in those days.

But what they thought was the end was, in fact, the beginning - of life, hope, light, joy, power, peace and so much more. For the Galilean peasant was no ordinary man – he was and is the **Son of God**.

waiting

Although crushed and humiliated, the first-century Jews in Palestine were not without hope. Part of their Old Testament faith was that they were God's special people. And God had pledged himself to step in and rescue them in times of trouble. He had done it in the past; he would do it again.

What's more, what they read led them to believe that it would be by means of a particular person. They had a number of ideas about who and what he would be like. Some expected another prophet like in the past; others thought he would come as a High Priest like those who had headed up the nation a few years previously, though much more wonderful.

But most people thought of him coming as a king.

*Every human birth is something special.
But Jesus' birth was unique because as God's Son he had no human father.
His mother, Mary, was a virgin when he was born.*

It was some time since they'd had a king worthy of the name. They had to look back to Old Testament times to find anyone who came anywhere near the ideal. There King David had been singled out by God and, for all his faults, he had subdued Israel's enemies and established national prosperity and peace.

That was the kind of leader they longed for: a ruler who was also a fighter, someone who would throw out the Romans and set up a powerful, rich Jewish kingdom. Every time some rebel leader or other raised his banner against Roman rule the people's hopes came to life. But their hopes were dashed every time a revolt was put down. This was the sort of king they expected Jesus to be - and it's easy to see why they were disappointed. Because Jesus wasn't interested in a military kingdom, but in something far bigger. Something, in fact, which could include us today.

a touch of life

At the age of thirty Jesus left his home town of Nazareth and his job there as a carpenter and took to the road as a travelling preacher. This signalled the beginning of an extraordinary three years which were to mark indelibly the memories of those who saw and heard what went on.

There was something about Jesus which attracted people. They hung on his words. They listened, as they had listened to no other preacher or teacher, to what he had to say. His words were comforting, telling of a God who loved and who searched for sinners, and who forgave. His words were demanding. They called people to a higher level of commitment than they had ever known before, and set standards of behaviour which were humanly impossible. His words were hard, cutting through the hypocrisy of outward religion, showing people how serious it was to play about with God. His words were powerful. They stopped people in their tracks and diverted them into entirely different lifestyles. And what Jesus said he demonstrated by what he did. Jesus could heal people who were sick - sometimes chronically sick, often incurably sick. He cooled fevers, made the lame walk, calmed the insane, made blind people see and deaf people hear, freed lepers from their awful disease - and even raised the dead.

No wonder people crowded to see him: the elderly, the poor, the ill, the depressed, the hopeless. Kids loved him. Crowds stood open-mouthed at the things he said and the miracles he performed. After Jesus had been through their village or town, nothing was the same again.

'I know men and I tell you that Jesus was no mere man.'

Napoleon

Messiah is simply the Hebrew word for 'someone who is anointed'. It is the same as the Greek word 'Christ'. In the Old Testament, kings among others were anointed with oil when they were appointed. It singled that person out as the one God had selected for the job. By Jesus' time, - Messiah was the title of the coming king. Outside Palestine, among non-Jewish Christians, who did not share the Jewish hope for such a leader, the term 'Christ' began to lose its special meaning. It increasingly came to be used as we used it today, as part of Jesus' personal name. In a similar way, very early on in the history of the church, believers were nicknamed 'Christians', or followers of Christ.

miracles don't happen . . .

... do they?

We can dismiss miracles only if we believe in a physical world governed by unchangeable laws of cause and effect. What happens today, it is argued, is what always has and what always will happen, whatever the circumstances. Miracles do not happen today and therefore they did not then.

We might be able to understand Jesus' healings as a case of mind over matter, but people cannot walk on water or still storms- so Jesus could not either. We cannot change water into wine or feed thousands of people with a picnic lunch- so neither could he. Apart from resuscitation, the dead, once dead, remain dead- even for Jesus. So although he may have seemed to do these things- although his disciples may have wanted him to do them they are actually impossible, and must be explained away. But what about the God factor?

If God really is involved in the daily running of the world, and if the laws of nature are his laws anyway, what's to stop him overriding them if he wants to? To say that God wouldn't do that sort of thing is beside the point, because the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, tells us that on occasion he did. What is more, the most outstanding demonstration is connected with Jesus' brief ministry. We may find this difficult to believe, but once we allow God into the equation, nothing is impossible.

The fact that Jesus had authority to do these things tells us something about him. They were one of the ways in which his Father singled him out as his Son while he was here on earth. People were faced with the evidence and left to draw their own conclusions. Perhaps the most remarkable of Jesus' miracles were his works of healing. Here he showed his deep concern for those who suffered.

Something for you to do at home:

How many of Jesus' healing miracles can you remember?

Look them up if you're not sure. Then write them in the space below.

Try to think of at least five!

1
2
3
4
5

Jesus – storyteller

Although Jesus often taught his followers quite plainly and openly, he just as often spoke to the crowds in what are called **parables**.

Parables are stories with a spiritual meaning hidden away in them. He used the ordinary, everyday events with which they were familiar, and he did it in such a gripping way that his hearers were caught up in the action - and often surprised by the outcome.

Sometimes the point he was making was all too obvious. Sometimes only those who were in tune with him and his message realized what he was getting at. Sometimes even his disciples only understood what he had been saying after his death and resurrection.

what Jesus said about himself

In his teaching and in the demands he made, Jesus said some remarkable things about who he was and what he had come to do. It is true to say that no other religious teacher, in or out of the Bible, has described himself as Jesus did.

The downtrodden and badly-treated have often looked to military leaders to solve their problems. Jesus came as his people's leader-but he refused to fit the military mould.

- **Jesus forgave people their sins - something only God can do.**
- **He said he had come to fulfil God's Old Testament Law.**
- **He said he was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy as the Messiah, God's chosen one.**
- **Jesus described himself as God's Son, possessing a unique relationship with God as his Father.**
- **He said that only he could perfectly reveal God to men and women.**
- **He spoke of himself as the person who would one day judge the world in God's place.**
- **He asked for complete obedience on the part of his followers.**

I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.

Something for you to do at home:

Jesus gives us many clues as to his identity – many times he said, **I AM . . .**

How many of these titles do you know. Can you think of ten?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

Man of history

Some people have tried to argue that Jesus never existed as a historical person at all. This is the usual Marxist explanation of the story. But no reputable historian who has examined the New Testament evidence would take that position. It is usually those who want to prove a point or to underpin some philosophy of their own who argue in this way.

'It is not historians who propose "Christ-myth" theories.'

Professor F. F. Bruce

real flesh and blood

Whatever else they might have had to come to terms with, Jesus' followers knew they were dealing with a man. He was not like one of the mythical gods of ancient Greece who were said to go on a spree by taking human form for a while. Nor was he, as some have suggested, an extra-terrestrial being out of a flying saucer.

The Gospels tell us that he had a human body like ours, with all its functions and restrictions. He grew up, felt hunger and thirst, was tired and slept. He could suffer and bleed - he could feel, rejoice, grieve. At times he was angry; at others he was lonely. He spoke in a language they all understood, and he used ideas they were all familiar with. There were some things he did not know, even though he knew a great deal more than anyone else.

Most significant, he was tempted as every man or woman is tempted. The Bible tells us specifically that he was tempted to misuse his miraculous powers, to call attention to himself, to duck his Father's will for him. What was really different about Jesus was that he never gave in. He always was and did exactly what God his Father wanted.

In that respect he was what every human should be like, because sinning doesn't make us any more human - it makes us less. And Jesus was not less than a man - he was the only perfect man who ever lived.

action – reaction

It was one of Jesus' closest friends, Peter, having seen what Jesus said and did, who finally went public with his conclusions about him: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' For him, as for Jesus' other followers, 'Messiah' meant nothing less than Israel's military deliverer and future King.

But Jesus gave them all a shock. He admitted that he was the Messiah - but not the one they expected. Instead of driving out the Roman occupation troops, he would be betrayed to them and they would put him to death. And afterwards he would rise from death. Jesus' words were confusing and unwelcome. A dying Messiah had no place at all in their idea of things, even though it was common knowledge that what Jesus was saying and doing was proving an embarrassment to the Jewish authorities.

Because Palestine wasn't a very important place, the Jews were allowed a measure of freedom and self-government. The Jewish leaders, however, lived on a knife-edge most of the time. They hated the Romans, but they knew that if they weren't careful, they would lose what meagre privileges they had. So when the odd imposter arose, claiming to be a leader and raising a following, they bit their nails and hoped he would go away. In Jesus' case it was even worse for he was making what seemed to them to be crazy claims which added up to nothing less than blasphemy. You can't be reared to believe in no God but one and take happily to a man who speaks like God.

So to pre-empt trouble they bribed one of his followers. They arrested Jesus in a midnight swoop. They hastily tried him on trumped-up charges, and they handed him over to the Roman authorities as a dangerous agitator who was disturbing the peace. Pilate, the Roman governor, who was not known for his humane treatment of anybody, would have dismissed the case - but the Jews insisted and pressurized him into signing Jesus' death warrant. And as the Roman soldiers marched the stumbling figure out to the place of execution, the affair must have seemed as good as finished.

Mad, bad - or God?

Taking Jesus' life, miracles, and what he said about himself together (and the greatest miracle, the resurrection, was yet to come), we're forced to come to some conclusion about this unique historical figure.



Was he mad?

making crazy statements, claiming in his own deluded way to be God? Shouldn't they have quietly shut him up for his own protection? No doubt that is what we would do to him today. But many people who reject the idea that Jesus was God agree that his general teaching is entirely sane. His teaching about God, love, faith, forgiveness, good and evil is streets ahead of anything else in the world's religious writings. What he said rings true to our own experience.



Was he bad?

Was he an imposter who tried to manipulate people for his own gain or power? His lifestyle doesn't point to this. He lived as a peasant to the end. His possessions were minimal. He refused any political role. He called people to loving, giving and serving - and he lived that way himself. He knew the risks he was running, and he still did what he had to do. Humanly he had everything to lose and nothing at all to gain. And as for a character reference, even his enemies had to cook up charges to bring him down.



But that leaves us with only one alternative. He was what and who he said he was.

He was nothing less than the Son of God - God with us for a brief time, sharing our limitations and woes, working for our healing and peace, and challenging us to live for God.

People in his own time had to decide about him - and it's the same today.

He was either who he said he was or we have to write him off as a deluded imposter, or a tragic martyr for a lost cause.

We can't remain neutral about Jesus.