

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

7 : JESUS.

Composing this talk was by far the hardest so far, and it's also the talk which strays furthest from the notes.

It is not intended to be some sort of hatchet job, though I fear that it might appear so. That's because I have tried to put aside two millennia of accreted reverence (and perhaps a little superstition), and to get closer to the real Jesus.

This Jesus didn't live in cathedrals and palaces and icons and doctrine, or even on a cross. He didn't live anywhere ("the Son of man hath nowhere to lay His head" (*Matthew* 8.20)), He talked to sinners, and He loved lost people like me. And because of that, they (we) killed Him, and He didn't fight back because He loved even those who killed Him.

That's the Jesus I want to talk about.

It has taken us a long time to get here !

Considering that Jesus is the central figure of the Christian church, you might reasonably expect Him to turn up before the seventh talk of ten.

But that's because I wanted it to be clear that Jesus doesn't come with a lot of obligatory free software (you don't want it, you don't know what it does, but mysteriously you can't manage without it), which is perhaps the way He's often presented.

Note that He does come as the first of our set of three talks on "aspects of Christian belief", which I've deferred until now so that I can say something about the free software first - and I hope I've at least suggested to you that it just might not be so important as it's sometimes made out to be, and also that I'm not expecting you to accept anything on my authority.

So let's begin.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT JESUS ?

Really very little, limited to the four gospels in the Bible. (His existence is mentioned in non-Biblical sources, but with no useful detail so far as I know.)

We have :

- Two accounts of His birth, rather different, and not too easy to fit together. They agree in being spectacular, which makes it all the odder that His birth isn't mentioned in the New Testament letters. (I think.)
- One account of His Bar Mitzvah (I think).
- Four accounts (three similar, one somewhat diverging) of His life over the three years or so of His ministry.

They're all different in detail; events come in different orders, depending on the point the gospel authors are trying to make.

The events described could hardly take much longer than a few weeks, so even in this immensely important period we have very little information.

And that's it.

It is VERY EXASPERATING. There are so many things which we'd like to know, which are mentioned in passing but never elaborated.

- Jesus was accused of consorting with sinners - but we don't know what He said to them on such occasions.
- He taught in synagogues - but what did He say, and how did He say it ? The very few fragments we have are very low key. Would He have liked Evensong ? The Toronto blessing ? Multimedia events ?
- He quotes the Jewish scriptures, but apparently not always quite reliably - how well did He know them ?
- He was called a "winebibber" - did He ever take a glass too many ?
- Was He kind to animals ? (He didn't do much for the Gadarene swine.)
- Where did He stand on ecology ? (He blasted a fig-tree because it had no fruit when He wanted it.)

You quite often hear, "If Jesus were here, he would" - but there's very little evidence.

WHAT DID HE SAY ?

Most of what we have is about Jesus's speaking; presumably that was thought to be more important.

But HE SAID (ALMOST) NOTHING NEW. (The "almost" is for safety's sake.)

If you read the Old Testament and Apocrypha, you find it (almost - see above) all there.

BUT He seems to have been VERY SELECTIVE.

Possible to suggest that His intention was to tell the Jews that they were doing it wrong in their emphasis on the law, and should direct their attention to the God Who inspired the law. Major points :

God loves you; you should love others.
God forgives you; you should forgive others.

(BUT God judges you; you should NOT judge others.)

WHAT DID HE WANT ? (Perhaps more important.)

A new relationship between God and man :

God is OUR FATHER.

- and other things too, but first He is our Father. This loving family relationship turns up often. Personal relationships are more important to Him than philosophy. (Down with doctrine !)

The law, while supported in principle, is generally played down, and reinterpreted whenever convenient. He certainly broke the law on occasion (particularly by working on the Sabbath), and defended His disciples when they did so (*Matthew* 12.1-5). He asked, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath day ?" (*Mark* 3.4) - legally, it certainly isn't if it's work.

In the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew* 5-7), He says, six times, something like "Ye have heard that it hath been said but I say unto you", each time reinterpreting the law to take the emphasis from some overt act and putting it on more personal motives, decisions, and consequences.

DID HE WANT, OR INTEND, TO START A CHURCH ?

It isn't at all obvious that He did. Apart from the bit about Peter, the rock (*Matthew* 16.18), there's little enough scriptural evidence for it.

After His personal ministry was over, His followers continued to worship in the synagogues, and it seems clear that their message was about a better way to be a Jew than about starting something else.

This caused trouble, and they eventually separated. Whether they jumped or were pushed seems less than completely clear.

He said that He had come for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (*Matthew* 15.24), and didn't seem at all positive about extending His mission to the gentiles. (That came after His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension).

WHAT DID HE DO ?

Preaching, teaching, healing, travelling, annoying the authorities, being crucified.

More demanding, for us, perhaps : worked miracles, rose from death.

(And - according to John's gospel - expected His followers to do yet more wonderful things (*John* 14.12).)

WHAT WAS HE ?

The big one.

HUMAN OR DIVINE ?

One point of view (C.S. Lewis ?) : "Either He was the Son of God, or he was a lunatic". That relies strongly on the Biblical text's accuracy in reporting Jesus's words.

Both : From Article II of the 39 - "... one Christ, very God and very Man".

MESSIAH (= CHRIST) : the anointed one of God.

Certainly extraordinary, with extraordinary gifts and abilities.
But expected us to do as much - it's God who really does it.

SON OF GOD : what does it mean ?

I'm a son of God; Jesus is the Son of God. The ancient texts are not written in upper and lower case.

Jesus is the "only begotten Son of God" : follows from the virgin birth. No doubt that God could do it if He so desired. But Jesus doesn't mention it, and nor do the epistles (I think). (Just as well He didn't leave a body - they'd be after His DNA.)

GOD : a Person of the Trinity.

Jesus did say things like "I and My Father are one" (*John* 10.30). (But I'm quite happy to say "I and my wife are one".)

He did pray to God, and didn't seem to have a hot line.
He didn't claim to know everything.

SACRIFICE FOR OUR SIN : the atonement.

Last supper; institution of the Holy Communion : "This is My blood ... which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (*Matthew* 26.28); Paul - "This is My body, which is broken for you" (*1 Corinthians* 11.24).

Theology largely from Paul (I think); Jesus's crucifixion seen in the tradition of the temple sacrifices; the PERFECT sacrifice through which all our sins could be forgiven.

But enormous problems. If God wants to forgive sins, why can't He ?

SON OF MAN : seems to have been Jesus's own favourite.

What does that mean ?

I've seen many comments, and have no way of judging between them :

- Means God - Daniel's vision (*Daniel* 7.13). All Jews would understand. (But while looking that up in a concordance, I noticed that that single reference followed well over fifty "Son of man"s in Ezekiel, where they refer to Ezekiel himself. (NOTES : no, I didn't check them all - that's from memory; I stopped counting at fifty.)
- The Jews would have no idea what He was talking about.
- He was emphasising His humanity.

WHAT DO I THINK ?

First, I think that it doesn't much matter (except to me) what I think, and I'm certainly not commending it as a model, but it's an example.

I don't know whether Jesus was human or divine. He was certainly close to God, inspired by God, devoted to God.

I would like Him to be human, because then He's an example for me. If He's part God, then He has advantages over me, and I can't compete. I think He could be human; inspired people can rise to wonderful heights of love, service, and self-sacrifice, and His miraculous powers are just as credible if they are God's acts, in response to Jesus's prayers. Then the suggestion (His, according to John's gospel) that we might do even more wonderful things is credible.

Orthodox (as opposed to heterodox, not Catholic) Christians disagree. They assert that Jesus was, and is, divine, and that it's important; it shows that God really does know what it's like to be human, and can therefore truly understand our condition. They assert He is also a valid example, because the incarnation was perfect - He really was a "perfect man".

Finally, I think that it's more important for me to get on with the job of being a Christian than to worry too much about questions like this. I am confident that if it really is important then God will draw it to my notice, as He has done with some other questions (not particularly doctrinal).

And - as with other matters of doctrine - I'd encourage anyone worried by the question to defer it if a satisfying answer doesn't immediately appear.