

AN INVITATION TO SHARE MY JOURNEY

Ben Whitney

www.ben-whitney.org.uk

If Christianity does not reinvent itself, it will virtually disappear in our culture. As traditionally formulated, and as perpetuated in the ancient creeds and the usual statements of belief, it is based on a set of assumptions that modern thinking people do not share and on claims which they know are not true. Biblical fundamentalism/literalism will no doubt survive, but only within its own self-authenticating enclave. Many would say it doesn't matter. Christianity deserves to die and we don't need it. They may be right but I still hope it may yet change rather than face continuing inevitable decline.

I am not a complete amateur in this rather boggy field, but I make no claim to be an 'expert'. I have a first-class postgraduate degree in Theology and used to preach most Sundays, but hadn't bothered with it much for almost 20 years until recently. But this Jesus story is my heritage and, if we start from somewhere else, it may still have something to offer. However, we will need another Reformation first. I am by no means the first to suggest that we will need to lose our attachment to any *religion* in order to find an authentic modern *faith* that can still help us to live well. That potentially life-changing adventure requires us to question everything we have assumed to be essential before, even our idea of 'God'. I am not optimistic that most current believers will be willing to change that radically. But perhaps some 'non-believers' will come to see that it's not all a complete waste of time after all. There are still things we *can* believe in.

My retirement project is to offer my thoughts via my website on each Sunday's Common Lectionary passages. ***Not Your Usual Sermon***, is based on six principles:

- All religious concepts and ideas, including those about 'God' are made up of human language, poetry and metaphorical comparisons, not 'literal' descriptions. So we can, and must, change them as new understandings arise.
- Following 'The Way of Jesus' is my sole focus. 'Seeking the kingdom' is all about how to live, now. But we only have his life and teaching at second-hand, 'according to' those who wrote about it later, not his 'actual' words.

- The Bible was written by particular groups and individuals in particular times and places over hundreds of years. It is interesting, often thought-provoking, worth studying because of its influence, but I don't always have to agree with it.
- As all things religious come from inside each of us using our human faculties and intellectual powers, not from a supernatural 'Other', any 'faith' must be rational, not require us to set aside everything else we know to be true first.
- No question cannot be asked; no belief or Creed can go unchallenged, no doctrine is beyond dispute. We need a wholly new C21st vocabulary if anyone is going to take any notice, not the repetition of now outdated ideas.
- The Christian community must be inclusive, outward-looking and experimental, as Jesus was. Everyone has an equal place whatever their gender, sexuality, race, ability, class or status. Beliefs do not all have to be the same to belong.

I appreciate that these principles will challenge many of those who currently call themselves 'Christians' and that change is always difficult. But I'd like them to try! Not that this is a particularly new agenda. Issues much like these have been around for centuries. But up until about 100 years ago, the Church managed to ignore them, largely because of its overwhelming power and influence. We were expected to be deferential and unquestioning. With the coming of mass education and even the internet, all that has gone. We have come of age and can draw our own conclusions now.

What do we know now that the ancient founders of Christianity did not know? That human beings gradually evolved; they were not 'created' from scratch just a few thousand years ago. In the C4thCE when the doctrines were formulated they thought the earth was at the centre of the whole Universe – and it took till 1991 for the Roman Catholic Church to recognise that it was wrong! There are billions of other planets that were formed over hundreds of billions of years, but talk of a God 'up above', who 'came down' to earth and knows us each individually, carries on regardless. 'Sin' is a human construct not a divine judgement. Our existence begins when we are conceived and, like illness, death is just part of the deal, not a punishment from which we need to be 'saved'. Science makes things happen, not prayer, and it has rules that do not get broken on request.

If we are still to talk of 'God' at all we now need new ways to express the inexpressible; like a 'breath' or an 'energy' that keeps it all going, not an idol that we have made in our own image and whom we claim to know so confidently because 'He' is pretty much like us! Many of those within the Christian bubble do not seem to realise that their world view of a personal 'God'/'Father' who watches over us and a creation that operates under 'His' control, is now unbelievable. These are all human ideas, not an actual description of whatever there may be that we cannot know. We wrote the Bible - it didn't fall from the sky. Religions can still create a helpful framework within which we can live and make choices if we want to, (though some of their moral values are now deeply questionable), but the idea that any religion can tell us what will happen after death is going way beyond our area of knowledge. We created *all* our religious systems, so it's worth still studying, exploring and reflecting on them, but I cannot put my faith in any of them as a source of unchanging eternal truth.

The focus of 'Christian' faith needs to shift onto the story of the human person of Jesus as a healer, teacher and prophet. Of course it is not a fly-on-the-wall documentary. His life and teaching only come to us mediated through the later writers; that's as close as we can get, though sometimes it may be possible to spot the joins! And what was said *about* him later took us in an entirely different direction. But I still think we can catch a sense of the real person behind the tradition. In particular, we know what happened to him in the end, as much as we know anything about him, so he stands alongside the marginalised, murdered and mistreated in our time – but *only* if he was entirely human as we are.

If it still to mean anything, we have to make this story work for us in our time as others did in theirs. It helps to be part of a community, and I do now touch base now and again at an inclusive and experimental church or at my local Cathedral, both of which I find uplifting and rewarding in different ways. I also belong to some radical Christian groups and networks. Being accepted as we are, not made to conform to what others think we should be, might just be enough to stop the whole human enterprise of Christianity virtually disappearing, at least here.

If you'd like to share in this journey, with a guide book that needs constant updating and a determination to make the most of the ever-changing view while it lasts, please join me in the coming months and years, (if I can sustain it that long). The sermon and discussion downloads every 3 months are entirely free. If this is all unacceptable heresy or intellectually naïve to you, then farewell and may your 'God' go with you. But otherwise, welcome!

ADDENDUM

Since first writing this Introduction, I have been asked to clarify who I think Jesus was/is and how is that different from conventional Christian beliefs? Much will emerge in the coming months but it may be helpful to make a few things clear at the start.

- We cannot access the historical Jesus directly. He wrote nothing himself. The gospels are not verbatim eye-witness records. Everything said about him, some possibly from older but unknown oral and written sources, is mediated through later creative writers who had come to believe certain things about him but who weren't there at the time.
- So I will talk generally of Jesus 'as he was remembered' or seek only to clarify the point I believe the particular gospel writer/tradition is making about him, not claim that we ever have the actual words of Jesus himself, apart from a few Aramaic fragments. It can sound rather cumbersome and I'd like more but it isn't available!
- It is my general position that the first understandings of Jesus were quite unlike the later claims of the Church about him. The term 'son of God' as first used never meant 'same as God'. It is a complete misunderstanding to see Jesus as somehow unique: both God and a man or as semi-God and semi-human. He was as human as I am. Every person can be a son or daughter of God.
- 'Christ' is a term that cannot be applied to the human Jesus. It was not his surname! It carries all kinds of implications. Theoretically it's just the Greek for 'Messiah', (a claim which he doesn't seem to have made), but it carries all kinds of additional baggage which he would not have recognised.

Geza Vermes in his classic study, 'Jesus the Jew'; (1976), concludes with the following assessment of who he was:

'Jesus the just man, the 'zaddik', Jesus the helper and healer, Jesus the teacher and leader, venerated by his intimates and less committed admirers alike as prophet, lord and 'son of God'.

So the 'Jesus'/'Christ' you might hear about in many churches is not necessarily the same Jesus who is accompanying me on this journey. But I believe he can help us to discover what it means to be fully human. That's the only reason why I'm still bothering.