

This is our fourth week of a 5 week journey across the terrain of the entire Bible. We're going to move from Genesis to Revelation and survey the one big story that holds this book together. Essentially there are two questions: 1) **what is the big story that holds it together?** 2) **Can I believe it?** Is it really true, and if it is really true, what difference does it make to me?

In the **first week** we looked at Genesis 3. We saw that despite being in the garden enjoying relationship with God Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and, as a result, their relationships with God, creation and each other were broken. In response God expelled them from the garden but said that he would send someone who would rescue them.

In **week 2** we saw that God honoured his promise and he sent Moses to rescue them from slavery in Egypt and he got them to the Promised Land. He gave them Laws so that they could be a light to the world of what it was like to live as the people of God. That looked quite like the end of the story, but it wasn't quite.

Last week we looked at Israel's Golden Age under Kings David and Solomon. During this time Solomon built a temple for God and God's spirit filled the Temple as a sign that he was with his people. However, for all his wisdom, Solomon ended up worshipping other gods and led his people astray. Last week was a false summit on our journey through the bible but today we get to the peak of human history.

Of all the questions that we may ask as we go through our journey the greatest question of all, the question repeated through the Gospels, is this, "**Who is this man?**" He was a **Man of Mystery** His impact has been felt far and wide down through the corridors of history.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu leader, asked "What does Jesus mean to me? To me he was one of the greatest teachers humanity ever had."

HG Wells, the Victorian historian and science-fiction writer commented, "I'm historian, not a believer but I must confess that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very centre of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history."

Albert Einstein, the secular Jewish scientific genius wrote these words in a newspaper article, "No man can deny the fact that Jesus existed, nor that his sayings are beautiful. No man can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. I am a Jew but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene."

Monty Python produced a film, the life of Brian, which poked fun at Christianity. But you know the background to that film is quite interesting. The story goes that John Cleese and Michael Palin went away one weekend with copies of the Gospels and the intention of producing a film about the life of Jesus. But when you read the gospels they found they couldn't do it. The film they ended up making was about a parallel character rather than Jesus himself. Why? Well this is how John Cleese explained it: the moment you could really near the figure of Christ it just wasn't really funny because Christ was wise and flexible and

intelligent and didn't have any of those things that comedy is about - envy, greed, malice, avarice, lust, stupidity.

So who is this man? In our great sweep through history why does it all come down to this one man? We've been pursuing the great story that holds the entire Bible together and we started the expedition back in Genesis with one of the consequences of their rebellion meant that Adam and Eve died, both physically and spiritually. But God loved them and rescue plan unfolded. God promised to send one who would crush the serpent. Moses led them out of Egypt but he didn't crush the serpent. King Solomon led them into a time of peace, a golden age. But he didn't crush the serpent. The Old Testament draws to a close with the people of God a mere remnant of what they once were. I hope you know by now that I love the Old Testament - I love the stories, the character's and the history. Of course there are bits that are difficult to understand and come to terms with but generally I think it's great. It is also disappointing. It finishes with the serpent still at work, with people still in rebellion enslaved to the sin. Suffering and death still dominate the story. The Old Testament is about crying out for completion and that brings us to the Gospels. To understand who Jesus is we need to understand what he came to do and why this was the right time to do it.

He was **a man of mystery** but he was also **a man on a mission**. Here is a side of Jesus that we don't always see as we have this reading from John 2:15 *So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"*

Jesus meek and mild! Sometimes the Jesus people say they admire is not the real Jesus of history, it's a Jesus of their own imagination. A Jesus and they are comfortable with. The real Jesus is not so easy to pin down. He doesn't fit our neat categories or expectations, but he is real. I can resist a famous quotation from the story, 'the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', where CS Lewis carefully chooses the image of the lion to represent Christ. This is the moment when a family of beavers tried to explain who Aslan is to the children who have gone through the wardrobe into Narnia. They explain Aslan is not just a lion, he is a great lion. He is the king of the beasts and the real ruler of Narnia. When the children hear about him Susan asks, "Is he safe?" Mrs Beaver replies, "If there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without his knees knocking they are either braver than most or just silly." Lucy then asks, "So he isn't safe?" And Mr Beaver says this famous line, "**Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe but he's good. He's the king I tell you.**"

Of course Jesus isn't safe. He doesn't fit all of our expectations and neat categories, but he is good. What provoked such anger in the Temple courts was with the king had come to his palace and found it wanting. You remember what the Temple was supposed to be - it represented the very presence of God among his people. And by the time of King Herod the Temple has been elaborated, significantly rebuilt and extended, but it's only an empty shell

because the cloud of God's glory no longer fills the Temple. It was a place of religion without reality. The sacrificial system is now a system of commodity trading. It looked a grand but it had lost touch with its real purpose. Jesus is not impressed with grand architecture – there's a lesson for congregations everywhere: Your building is not that important! In fact those impressed by architecture were startled by the words of v 19 *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"* Last week I said that Herod had been a great builder and he had spent years and a great deal of money on the building. Verse 21 *21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*

Here you see is the fulfilment of the Temple. You remember the consequences of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - the consequences were death. We all die, but all through the Old Testament God gave the people the means to make sacrifices in order to atone for sin. They offered a substitute animal as a sacrifice in the place of their sin. The animal had to die so that they might live. But all that religion could do was to provide a picture. Thousands and thousands of animal sacrifices as a substitute for sin simply served as an illustration, a picture. All religion really does is offer a sticking plaster for sin. It offers rules and regulations and tries to encourage improvement. It reminds us of how bad we are and how we need a substitute. But it was only ever an illustration or a picture. The great and striking architecture of the Temple was only ever a giant picture book to illustrate something even greater, the reality of which is found in what Jesus came to do.

In his own body Jesus bore the penalty for all the human wickedness and evil of human history. It was all focused on this one point in history that Jesus became our substitute in his body on the cross. God poured out his wrath upon Jesus. All the wrath that sin and evil of history has deserved was poured out on Jesus the substitute. And this is not, as some would have it, cosmic child abuse. This is in no sense a father abusing a child. Why not? Because Jesus is himself God in a body. When Jesus the son bore the wrath of the Father it was God himself taking the punishment that we deserve upon himself.

So Jesus brought about the reality of which the Temple was only a picture. You see one greater than the stone Temple was among them. That's why he drove out the money changers, overturning their tables, out of the house of prayer. The King had arrived. You notice the question of the religious leaders in verse 18 *"What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"* I've made some great claims in this last few minutes but what is the authority or evidence that any of this is really true? And the answer is found in the resurrection of Jesus. Destroy this temple, meaning his own body, and I will rebuild it in three days. You want to know that death is not the end, Jesus has conquered death. After three days in the tomb he rose again and the new creation had begun.

The stone Temple of King Herod was destroyed in 70 A.D., nearly 2000 years ago and it has never been seen since. Jesus was executed in 33 A.D. and he's been the talk of the globe ever since. Religious leaders, artists, comedians, new atheists cannot stop talking about the mystery of Jesus. Let me give you three reasons for believing in the resurrection of Jesus this morning.

Number one **the evidence of history**. That's why during this series we've had photos of archaeology, because the Bible itself is thick with history. There are many references to Jesus outwith the Bible including the famous ones by Josephus, Tacitus and Pliny. There are hostile critics who wrote against Christianity but never doubted the historical authenticity of Jesus. Among sceptical historians, one criteria for distinguishing authentic history from legend is called the criteria of embarrassment. We all know something about embarrassment. This criteria suggests that if a document has features that would be embarrassing to the original authors then it is unlikely that they have made it up. It would be less likely to have been made up if it makes you look bad. By that criteria the Gospels are full of authentic material because it is full of material that is embarrassing to the original followers of Jesus. The leaders of this new movement are shown in poor light - Thomas doubts the resurrection; Peter famously denies Jesus three times, but even before that continues to misunderstand and be scolded for his arrogance; Mary his mother and James, leading figures in early church, is recorded as saying that Jesus is out of his mind; the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were all women and that meant their evidence was not permissible in an ancient Jewish court of law. The records we have are authentic records, not dressed up to try to appear more authentic but sober and reasonable accounts of what actually took place.

Many people today, including many prominent atheists and humanists, seek to deny the existence of Jesus even in the face of so much historical evidence. Why? Because they know that to accept the evidence of his existence is to open the door. Once you concede that Jesus existed how do you then explain him away? How do you explain away the events that follow? How do you explain the evidence for the resurrection? One atheist, Leslie Scrase, has written a book called 'the Unbeliever's Guide to the Bible', which is essentially a commentary on the whole Bible from an atheist's point of view. He accepts that Jesus existed and he accepts the empty tomb, but he therefore has to explain what happened to the body of Jesus. Here is what he says: *Perhaps Matthew is right when he speaks of a great earthquake in which case the body of Jesus could simply have disappeared down a fissure in the ground.*

The attempt to explain away the resurrection becomes far less plausible and less likely than the astonishing alternatives. That the body of Jesus simply disappeared in a fissure in the ground doesn't even begin to explain the post resurrection appearances of Jesus, or the inability of the authorities to find a body and produce it to refute the claims of the early church, or the impact on the first believers who go on to turn the world upside down.

So the number one evidence is the evidence of history but secondly we have **the existence of the church**. How else do we explain the emergence of this new movement that would include

Jews and Gentiles willing to die for their new-found convictions? No one gained financially or politically during the first two hundred years of Christianity. Matthew speared to death in Ethiopia in A.D. 60; John exiled to the island of Patmos; Peter crucified upside down in AD 64; James put to the sword in A.D. 43; Thomas executed in India A.D. 72; Paul last seen under house arrest in Rome AD 67, awaiting execution. To claim that the resurrection was a hoax, or a hallucination, doesn't fit with the character or resolve of Jesus' followers. People who actually knew him best were willing to die for him.

Thirdly, **the experience of believers**. The present reality of the risen Jesus is at work in the lives of thousands of believers across the world. Whether it has been through the gentle change of heart over time, or a dramatic conversion of a moment, the personal evidence of experience is something that continues to mount with the passing of time. That points us finally to the message of Jesus. If that was the mission of Jesus then what is the message that he has to share?

We find out by listening in to this night-time conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John 3:1-2 *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."* It's interesting that Nicodemus comes to have this conversation at night perhaps she was embarrassed with all the hostility that was towards Jesus and he doesn't want to be caught out by his colleagues. Perhaps it's honesty, perhaps he doesn't want one of those staged debates of a public encounter. Whatever the reason he seems to be a genuine seeker. He was a religious person but wanted to know more. Perhaps you're a bit like that this morning - you have no doubts that Jesus existed; you don't doubt that he was a remarkable man and you think that if there is a God maybe Jesus was sent by him. You can see that the evidence accumulates and the more you look into it the more there is to see.

Jesus says something to you, just as he said to Nicodemus, and it is a message that fits our theme as we go through the Bible. With all the weight of history behind us and all that we seen through the pages of history Jesus says this in verse 3 *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

I could give you their tickets to Israel and you could go and see great finds in the museums. You could visit the historic locations but unless there is some spiritual change you can actually refuse to see. We are born once into this dying world and we bear the nature of Adam. We choose our own path and we resist God, making up our own rules. Adam and Eve chose to do on that day their own thing. They chose their own way when they reached out to eat the fruit and for thousands of years human beings have been looking for a solution. Maybe through religion. Through sacrifices, laws or rules.

But God has shown that even if he blesses us with great wealth and a land of our own, with a Temple and a sacrificial system offering forgiveness of sin and relationship with him we still turn away and looked to do what we want to do. Solomon is the great example of that. The Old Testament is an example of God's faithfulness and human failure. Noah ended up a drunk. Abraham was a liar. And David an adulterer. Solomon an idolater. The best that religion can do is offer a sticking plaster for human sin. It cannot in itself destroyed the serpent's work.

What we need is not religion but resurrection. Just as Jesus conquered death and rose to life conversion means being born again. It means passing from death to life. You and I most need new spiritual life. Nicodemus doesn't understand and that's why he asks what is, in effect, another 'really' question. Verse 4 *"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* It's kind of you can't really go back and be born again, can you?

Jesus is saying at this opportunity for a new life is for everyone. This isn't just for young people. It's for all people of every age, background or religious experience. Your sin, no matter how great, can be forgiven. Jesus cried from the cross, "It is finished!" The mission was accomplished. The job was complete. Now you're life ahead, no matter how short, can reach into eternity. Death will not get to the final word. You see Jesus came to bring much more than a patch up job. He came to bring a resurrection. Sadly, for so many people, church was and perhaps still is more about religious culture than personal relationship. I suspect many good churchgoing people in this country will never have been faced with the truth of this statement, "You must be born again." I hope that at the end of my ministry people will not be able to say, "You never spoke about Jesus. You never told me how amazing he is. You never told me that I need to repent and to make Jesus Lord of my life."

I try to talk about Jesus as much as I talk about God. I believe Jesus is God but, in the society in which we live, God has become a bit of a generic word and people take different meanings from it. That's why I tend to talk about Jesus because if we can understand Jesus, who he is and what he did, there's less confusion and misunderstanding. You may not agree with what I think but you'll know why I believe it to be true.

My first car was a Fiat 127 – it was bright yellow! It was old when I bought it and, on my very first journey – home from where I had bought it – the exhaust went. The seat collapsed. There were holes where it had rusted through but a bit of rust remover and some paint made it look like new. Religion offers a patch up job but Jesus offers transformation. You see the Bible says, and history proves it, that our problem is on the inside. There is a heart condition that you and I have and Jesus came to deal, not with the outside appearances, but with the inside reality. Becoming a Christian is no patch up job. It is a radical transformation and Jesus, through his death and resurrection, crushed the serpent. He destroyed the serpent's work and transforms human lives, and that is what he offers to you and me today. This is the true mountain peak of Bible history. This is where we arrive at Golgotha at the mountain where Jesus died, but he

brought about transformation. I wonder if you came to church today essentially looking for information, or company, or conversation or some singing. I hope you get all of that but there's something so much more that is available to you today - today you can have a saviour. This man of mystery calls you to come and to follow him, to be born anew and to start again. Not to have an outside patch up job, but to have an inner transformation through knowing him. Not just as the King but as your King.