



Jesus

a primer for the curious



God of common sense

Belief in God is common sense.

This is not intended as bait for atheists. It is simply a historical observation: belief in God or gods is a universal reality throughout time. Like the fascination with art and music, or our quest for intimacy and social organization, reverence for a Creator is one of the few shared traits of the whole human family. Even today, four out of five Australians acknowledge the existence of God; only about one in 20 describe themselves as atheists.¹

Of course, the proposition *God exists* is not provable in a mathematical sense, nor can it be tested by science. Like love, art and human consciousness itself, this truth sits outside the reach of empirical testing. It is a macro-truth which makes sense of the world we live in and which has therefore made a lot of sense to a lot of people throughout time. It is *common* sense.

It may be true, as the minority argue, that the sophisticated orderliness of the universe and the mystery of the human mind are the result of blind, natural forces. But this explanation continues to strike most men and women – whether rich or poor, ancient or modern, educated or otherwise – as profoundly unlikely and deeply unsatisfying. More plausible, it seems, is the observation of the ancient biblical poet:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.²

If this is true, the question of God is the most interesting and urgent of all.



Whose god?

But the simple fact of worldwide reverence for a Maker raises an obvious question: whose god should we listen to? Perhaps there is a spiritual kingdom beyond the material one, but which version should we seek?

The unique and enduring claim of Christianity in all its forms is that the God of universal conviction – of our common sense – has broken into history for all to see.

The 'kingdom of God' has touched the world of humanity in a tangible way.

While churches have disagreed about many things through the centuries, the acknowledged core of Christianity is Jesus Christ, his teaching, healings, death and rising to life. And all of these – including the healings and resurrection – remain the subject of serious examination by scholars today.

Because Christianity's claims are uniquely tangible, having to do with historical events not simply timeless spiritual truths, they are probed and evaluated in a manner without parallel in the study of the world religions. Archaeologists dig up Galilee and Jerusalem to see if Jesus' stomping ground has been accurately described by the Gospels (the New Testament accounts of his life). Historians pore over the non-Christian evidence to see if Jesus' teaching, healings, death and resurrection rate a mention outside the Bible. And they analyse the New Testament writings themselves to assess their worth as independent historical sources. On all these counts Christianity fares much better than most of us realise.³ The Christian Faith gladly places its neck on the chopping block of public scrutiny and invites anyone who wishes to take a swing.



Healer

But when we open the pages of the Gospels we are confronted with the claim that Jesus restored the sight of the blind, healed the sick and exercised mastery over nature itself. While the *non-Christian* references to Jesus corroborate his fame as a wonder-worker, can such claims be believed today?

How you and I answer this question depends not only on historical evidence, which in the case of Jesus' miracles is plentiful, but on our underlying beliefs about God. If we assume that the observable laws of nature are the only things governing the universe – that there is no Law-giver behind these laws, no God – then claims of miracles, no matter how widespread the historical evidence, will be dismissed as nonsense. If, on the other hand, we hold that the laws of nature are not the only things governing the universe – that there is a Law-giver, or God, behind the laws of nature – then, given the strength of the historical evidence in this case, openness to Jesus' miracles is perfectly rational.⁴

More important than this philosophical observation is an understanding of the meaning of Christ's reported deeds. According to Jesus, his healings were a tangible sign that 'the kingdom of God has come.'⁵

The 'Kingdom of God' was first promised in the Old Testament, or Jewish Scriptures. There it is pledged that God will one day overthrow evil and heal our frailty, and so prove himself King over his creation.

If you have ever asked, 'Why doesn't God do something about the evil and pain of the world?', you have, in a sense, hoped for what Jesus called the Kingdom.

Strikingly, Jesus insisted that his healings, exorcisms and mastery over nature were not simply an indication of his kingly status in God's Kingdom; they were a preview of the Kingdom itself. His deeds were a pledge within history that what we all yearn for – the triumph of justice and the renewal of human life – God will one day accomplish.



Teacher

Jesus the Healer was also famous as a Teacher – the point hardly needs stating. Many of his sayings have become proverbial in Western culture: ‘Turn the other cheek’,⁶ ‘Do to others what you would have them do to you’,⁷ ‘You are the salt of the earth’,⁸ ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’⁹ and countless other expressions of what, after two millennia, seem like self-evident wisdom.

But what is the central obligation of men and women, according to Jesus? When asked this very question he replied:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.¹⁰

According to Jesus Christ, the Golden Rule of God’s Kingdom is a simple, two-fold directive: love your Maker and love your neighbour. The logic is seamless. If God exists, what could be more basic to authentic human life than wholehearted devotion to our Creator and selfless care for our fellow creatures!

Jesus leaves no room here either for the *religious hypocrite* who is zealous for God but uncaring toward others or for the *ethical agnostic* who aims to be a ‘good person’ but who ignores the Creator himself. Both fail the teaching of Christ.

Our culture rightly condemns those who ‘love God’ but lack a basic human compassion. In doing so, however, we should recognize that the reverse is equally contemptible. Loving one’s neighbour while shunning the Creator is a grave distortion of the shape of human life. It is to break what Jesus called ‘the first and greatest commandment’. Such a person may be ‘good’ on their own definition, but not on Christ’s.



Judge

The Jesus who famously taught about love also spoke of judgment. There is no avoiding the topic.

Perhaps the modern aversion to the idea of divine punishment comes partly from a justified revulsion at old-fashioned 'fire and brimstone' preaching. But there is probably another, more basic, factor: we simply do not like it. The preferred God for many today is the vague, distant Creator who kick-started the universe but who now, if he thinks of us at all, warmly approves of most of what we do.

But, according to Jesus, when God establishes his Kingdom and puts everything to right, he will condemn all that is opposed to his just purposes. This will include ethical agnosticism no less than religious hypocrisy. Love of God and neighbour, then, is not simply the shape of an authentic human life; it is the criterion of divine judgment.

Jesus spoke of this regularly and without embarrassment, and even cast himself as the central character in the theatre of judgment:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'¹¹

The idea of Jesus as Judge both comforts and disturbs. It is reassuring to know that someone as compassionate and just as Christ is entrusted with the judgment of our flawed humanity. And, yet, as anyone who has read the Gospels will know, Jesus was uncompromising in his critique of our refusal to love (both God and neighbour).¹² Compassion and justice go hand-in-hand in the figure of Jesus. And, in the final events of his life, these themes became strangely intertwined.



Saviour

Christ's extraordinary life as Healer and Teacher (and future Judge) ended abruptly and in apparent failure. Crucifixion was the Roman empire's *summum supplicium*, 'ultimate punishment', usually reserved for political dissidents. No one could talk of a coming 'kingdom' and of his central place in it without provoking the wrath of Rome.¹³

But political explanations tell only part of the story. Far from being a failure, Christ's death was the ultimate expression of God's justice and compassion.

On the eve of his execution, as he shared one Last Supper with his followers, he spoke of his imminent death as a sacrifice which would guarantee God's forgiveness and open up to us God's Kingdom:

Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."¹⁴

Within hours, Jesus' blood would indeed be poured out, not as a simple act of martyrdom but as a willing substitute for those facing judgment. By Christ's sacrificial death, we who have failed the divine imperative – to love the Creator and care for our fellow creatures – may be freely forgiven: more than that, may share with Christ in his 'Father's kingdom'.

The Healer, Teacher and Judge is also the Saviour.



Lord

If the New Testament had left Jesus in a martyr's tomb, this would have been a perfectly respectable way to end the story of a great Jewish teacher and healer. But contrary to all expectations the followers of Christ insisted that their Saviour had been raised from the dead. Their claim, for which many of them gave their lives, launched a movement that would utterly transform the world.

Mainstream scholars agree on three things: (a) the claims about Jesus' resurrection were immediate, not part of a developing legend; (b) the tomb of Jesus was indeed empty shortly after his burial; (c) significant numbers of witnesses claimed to have seen him risen from the dead.¹⁵ As with miracles generally, how we interpret this data depends not so much on historical evidence – which in the case of these three points is very strong – but on those underlying convictions about God.

The first Christians had unflappable convictions about God and had no hesitation declaring that their Teacher, Healer and Saviour had been raised to life as Lord and God. The point is powerfully stated in one of the resurrection scenes of John's Gospel:

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹⁶

No belief is more central to Christianity than that this Teacher, Healer and Saviour was raised to life as 'Lord and God'. As the great Oxford don, C. S. Lewis, once said of his own move from atheism to Christian faith,

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹⁷



Epilogue Portrait of a Christian

The God of common conviction – of our common sense – has opened up his Kingdom to us in a tangible way in Jesus Christ. Christians seek to live in the light of this.

Christians believe that Christ's healings provide a glimpse of the restoration of all things in God's coming Kingdom. They see in Jesus' teaching, especially in his call to love God and neighbour, the shape of an authentic human life. They revere Christ as the one entrusted with God's final judgments and they rely on him as the one who died so that we might be freely forgiven. Above all, Christians believe that Jesus' resurrection establishes him as the divinely appointed Lord.

If all of this is true, nothing could be more important, more urgent, than to express to your Maker your desire to trust in these realities.

When asked by his followers how to express oneself to God, Jesus taught them the so called *Lord's Prayer* or *Our Father*. It is a beautiful expression of trust in God, a plea for forgiveness from God, a request that the Kingdom of God would shape our life here and now. If appropriate for you, please use the words to express your own desire to entrust yourself to the God Christ has revealed:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed (i.e., honoured) be your name.
Your Kingdom come.
Your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
 but deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power and the glory
 are yours now and forever.
Amen.¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ 80.1% and 5.3% respectively. Source: *World Values Survey*, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Ronald Inglehart et al. 2000).

² Psalm 19:1–2.

³ A starting point for investigating the historical basis of Christianity can be found in the author's *The Christ Files – How Historians Know What they Know about Jesus* (Blue Bottle Books, 2005).

⁴ An accessible introduction to the historical data concerning Jesus' reported miracles, along with an explanation of their meaning according to the Christian Gospels, can be found in the author's *A Spectator's Guide to Jesus – an introduction to the man from Nazareth* (Blue Bottle Books, 2005, pages 35-48) Representative of the mainstream scholarly conclusion that Jesus performed deeds which friend and foe alike took to be miraculous is the 500 page discussion by prolific US scholar, John P Meier, *A Marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus*, vol. 2 (Doubleday, 1994, pages 507–1038).

⁵ Matthew 12:28.

⁶ Matthew 5:39.

⁷ Matthew 7:12.

⁸ Matthew 5:13.

⁹ Acts 20:35.

¹⁰ Matthew 22:37–40.

¹¹ Matthew 7:21–23.

¹² Some of Jesus' teaching on God's judgment can be found in Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 13:22–30; John 5:22–27.

¹³ The account of the Roman trial of Jesus can be found in John 18:33–37.

¹⁴ Matthew 26:26–29.

¹⁵ Representative of this mainstream scholarly conclusion about the resurrection traditions are Prof. James Dunn of the University of Durham (*Jesus Remembered*. Eerdmans, 2003, pp.825-79) and Prof. Graham Stanton of Cambridge University (*The Gospels and Jesus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.269-299).

¹⁶ John 20:26-29.

¹⁷ C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. HarperCollins, 1997, p.43.

¹⁸ The Lord's Prayer, as it is called, can be found in Matthew 6:9–13.

National Library of Australia ISBN 1 921137 73 8
Written by John Dickson
Copyright Blue Bottle Books © 2006
Scripture taken from The Holy Bible,
New International Version
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International
Bible Society, 'NIV' and 'New International Version'
are trademarks registered in the United States Patent
and Trademark office by International Bible Society.
Design by Rachel Heriot





blue bottle
BOOKS

ISBN 1921137738



9 781921 137730