

CHRISTIANITY: Is it real - not just another religion?

Many people today have written off Christianity because they have seen it as just another religion. Jesus did not come just to establish a religion...we get the word religion from the Latin word 'religare' which means to 'bind' or to 'tie'...something that religion has done to countless millions of people throughout history in bringing them under bondage and tying them up with practices and ideas that have not brought them life. By contrast Jesus said. "I have come to give people life, that they may have it more abundantly." (*John 10:10*) Religion is man's effort working to reach God, whereas the basis of Christianity is God freely reaching down to provide man with the only way to have relationship with HIM.

If you've thought of Christian faith as merely 'getting religious', we hope this course will demonstrate the massive difference between religious activity and a genuine relationship with God through Jesus.

BORING?

For some, their experience of going to 'chapel' or school was very boring where the presentation of God (if He did actually exist!) left them with the impression of an angry, kind of brooding, old man type of person who you would not really want to know about. People's experiences of 'church' have often been a negative tedious duty. Maybe you've felt sympathy with Robert Louis Stevenson who once entered in his diary "I have been to church today and am not depressed" - you only go there if you have to - funerals, weddings and so on, otherwise it's just for "religious" people. And yet increasingly more and more people are discovering that being a Christian and being a "religious" person are two entirely different things.

There is a new interest in the Christian faith - specifically in the person of Jesus. There is a resurgence of interest among non church going people - many are asking questions about Jesus.

Was he merely a man or is he the Son of God? If he is, what are the implications for our everyday lives?

If your impression of the Christian faith has been that it is dreary and uninspiring, this course will provide the opportunity to take another look - perhaps in a way you have not before.

UNTRUE?

One of the objections raised to accepting Christianity is on the basis that what it claims is not true.

There are arguments that are supposed to disprove Christianity but generally these objections are flimsy and based on prejudice rather than open minded solid examination of the facts.

Some are bold enough to state categorically "there is no God!" This is really a remarkable assertion since to make such an absolute statement I must know there is no God in the entire universe. No human being has all knowledge -for example do you know how much gold there is in South Africa? Do you know the combined weight of the sand on all the

beaches on the islands of Hawaii? Or do you know how many hairs are on the back of an adult male Tibetan yak? Probably not. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that there are lots of things we don't know.

Bear in mind that Thomas Edison said "we do not know a millionth of one percent about anything". Let's say you had an incredible ten percent of all the knowledge in the universe. To know 100 percent you would need to know *everything* -there wouldn't be a rock in the earth you weren't familiar with or a fish in the most remote ocean whose daily life you weren't acquainted with. You would know everything in history - from that which is common to the minor details as to how many fleas Napoleon's cat had.

Ridiculous isn't it?

Yet lots of people are arrogant enough to say with the little bit of knowledge they have "there is no God".

It would be more appropriate for such a person to say "having the limited knowledge I have at present I believe that there is no God".

To objectively look at the facts, just considering creation and to say you don't know if God exists is a little like standing in front of a building and wondering if it could be true that there was a builder!

IRRELEVANT?

How can it be that something that happened 2000 years ago in far off Palestine have any relevance to our lives in twentieth century New Zealand? There are many in our secularised society who know little about Jesus Christ or what he did, or anything much to do with Christianity. They have concluded that there is "probably" nothing in it at all for me - unless I can be persuaded otherwise.

Christianity is far from boring, it is not untrue and it is not irrelevant. On the contrary it is exciting, true and relevant. Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). If this is so, there can be nothing more important in this life than our response to Him.

DIRECTION FOR A LOST WORLD

Men and women were created to live in a relationship with God. Without that relationship there will always be a hunger, an emptiness, a feeling that something is missing. A great columnist of this generation, Bernard Levin, once wrote an article called "Life's Great Riddle, and No Time to find its Meaning". In it he spoke of his great success as a columnist for over twenty years yet in spite of all this he feared he may have "wasted reality in the chase of a dream". He wrote

"To put it bluntly, have I time to discover why I was born before I die? ...I have not managed to answer the question yet, and however many years I have before me they are certainly not as many as there are behind. There is an obvious danger in leaving it too late... why do I have to know why I was born? Because, of course, I am unable to believe that it was an accident; and if it wasn't one, it must have a meaning."

He is not a Christian and wrote recently "For the fourteen thousandth time, I am not a Christian". Yet he seems to be only too aware of the inadequate answers to the meaning of life.

People spend much of their lives seeking something that will give meaning and purpose to life.

A French philosopher called Pascal once said "there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person". It's true. No matter how much happiness and how many comforts and material blessings or riches you can get hold of, there is still a hole inside that cannot be filled.

J. Paul Getty a man considered to have 'made it' in life on the basis of his vast riches said "I have lived my life a failure ...I have had five unsuccessful marriages."

Leo Tolstoy described by Encyclopedia Britannica as author of "one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature" wrote a book in 1879 called "A Confession". He had reached the top in his field but was left asking the question "so what?." as he faced up to the real questions of life - where did I come from?, where am I heading?, who am I?, what is life about?

Over a hundred years later nothing has changed.

Freddie Mercury, lead singer of the group Queen, who died late 1991 wrote in one of his last songs on *The Miracle* album, "Does anybody know what we are living for?" In spite of the fact that he had amassed a huge fortune and attracted thousands of fans, he admitted in an interview shortly before his death that he was desperately lonely. He said, "You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man and that is the most bitter type of loneliness. Success brought me world idolisation and millions of pounds but it's prevented me from having the one thing we all need - a loving, ongoing relationship".

He was right to speak of an 'ongoing relationship' as the one thing we all need. Yet no human relationship will satisfy entirely. Nor can it be completely ongoing. There always remains something missing. That is because we were created to live in a relationship with God. Jesus said "I am the Way". He is the only one who can bring us into relationship with God that goes on into eternity.

Can you imagine sitting watching your TV and it is so scratchy and fuzzy yet you're happy to put up with it because it's all you know. One day someone comes along and asks why you don't have an outside aerial. Oohh! On adding the aerial your enjoyment is transformed! Suddenly there's clear and distinct pictures. Life without a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is like the television without the aerial. Some people seem quite happy, because they don't realise there is something better. Once we have experienced a relationship with God, the meaning and purpose of life should become clear. We see things we have never seen and it would be foolish to want to return to the old way of life.

REALITY IN A CONFUSED WORLD

Sometimes people say, "It does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere." But sincerity is not the issue because we can be sincerely wrong. It matters a great deal what we believe because what we believe dictates how we live.

Other people's response to a Christian may be "it's great for you, but it's not for me". This is not a logical position. If Christianity is TRUE, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, Christians are deluded and it is not 'great for us' - it is very sad and the sooner we put it right the better. As the writer C. S. Lewis puts it, "Christianity is a statement which

if false is of no importance and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.” Is it true? Is there any evidence? Jesus said, 'I am... the Truth! What evidence is there to support his claim?

These are some of the questions we will be looking at in this course. There is actually a great deal of evidence that Christianity is true! Yet there is something more than just discovering information or an intellectual grasp of the truth. When Jesus said “I am the Truth...” He was making the point that we can experience Him as the truth. As we come into relationship with the one who is truth, our perceptions change and we begin to understand the truth about the world around us.

LIFE IN A DARK WORLD.

Jesus said, “I am the... Life.” In Jesus we find life where previously there has been guilt, fear, addiction, and the prospect of death. It is true that all of us were created in the image of God and there is therefore, something of dignity about all human beings.

However, we are also fallen - born with a propensity to do evil. Like a bowling ball with its natural bias we are drawn to bad and self-destructive behaviour.

In every human being the image of God has been to a greater or lesser extent tarnished and in some cases almost eradicated by sin.

SIN is in all of us.

Have you noticed how we compare ourselves often with others. For example I could say, “I'm nice because I don't rob banks, or commit crimes or do things to hurt others.”

Compared with some people this may be admirable but alongside the life of Jesus Christ we realise just how much there is wrong.

We all need forgiveness and only in the Lord Jesus Christ can it be found. What Jesus did when he was crucified for us was to pay the penalty for all the things we have done wrong. (We will look at this subject later on in more detail). We will see that he died to remove our guilt and to set us free from addiction, fear and ultimately death. He died instead of us.

On 31st July 1991 a remarkable event was celebrated. On the last day of July 1941 the Auschwitz sirens announced the escape of a prisoner. As a reprisal, ten of his fellow prisoners would die - a long, slow, starvation, buried alive in a specially constructed concrete bunker.

So all day, tortured by sun hunger and fear, the men waited as the German commandant and his Gestapo assistant walked between the ranks to select, quite arbitrarily, the chosen ten. As the commandant pointed to one man, Francis Gajowniczek, he cried out in despair, 'My poor wife and children'. At that moment the unimpressive figure of a man with sunken eyes and round glasses in wire frames stepped out of line and took off his cap. “What does this Polish pig want?” asked the commandant.

“I am a Catholic priest; I want to die for that man. I am old, he has a wife and children... I have no one” said Father Maximilian Kolbe. “Accepted” retorted the commandant, and moved on.

That night, nine men and one priest went to the starvation bunker. Normally they would tear each other apart like cannibals. Not so this time. While they had strength, lying naked on the floor, the men prayed and sang hymns. After two weeks, three of the men and Father Maximilian were still alive. The bunker was required for others so on 14th August, the remaining four were disposed of.

At 12.50pm, after two weeks in the starvation bunker and still conscious, the Polish priest was finally given an injection of phenol and died at the age of forty-seven.

On 10th October 1982 in St. Peter's Square, Rome, Father Maximilian's death was put in its proper perspective. Present in the crowd of 150,000 was Francis Gajowniczek, his wife, his children, and his children's children - for indeed, many had been saved by that one man.

Jesus' death, was indeed even more amazing because he died not just for one man but for every single individual in the world. If you or I had been the only person in the world, Jesus Christ would have died instead of us to remove our guilt. When our guilt is removed we have a new life.

Jesus not only died for us, he also rose again from the dead for us. In this act he defeated death. Most rational people are aware of the inevitability of death, although some people make bizarre attempts to avoid it.

Sylvester Stallone (Rambo) is so terrified of ageing and his body getting old and dying, that he has said he takes about sixty different types of 'non-ageing' drugs each day!

An English newspaper described another attempt at avoiding death.

In 1960 Californian millionaire James McGill died. He left detailed instructions that his body should be preserved and frozen in the hope that one day scientists might discover a cure for the disease that killed him. There are hundreds of people in Southern California who have put hopes of one day living again in this process which freezes and preserves human bodies. The latest development in Cryonics technology is called neuro-suspension which preserves just the human head. One reason why it is becoming popular is that it is much cheaper than preserving and maintaining a whole body. It reminds me of Woody Allen in *Sleeper* where he preserved just his nose.

Such attempts to avoid the inevitability of death are plainly absurd and indeed unnecessary. Jesus came to bring us 'eternal life'. This is a quality of life which comes from living in relationship with him. Jesus never promised an easy life but he promises fullness of life.

(John 17:3 and 10:10)

This new quality of life starts now and goes on into eternity. Our time on earth is relatively short, (the Bible says life is a puff of steam) but eternity is vast. Through Jesus, who said, "I am... the Life", we can not only enjoy fullness of life here but we can be sure it will never end.

Christianity is not boring. It is about living life to the full. It is not untrue - it is the truth. It is not irrelevant - it transforms the whole of our lives.