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*For Henry, Cora and future beloved companions*

# LIVING JESUS



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## *A word at the beginning*

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I was staying in the fascinating community of Taizé in France where 5,000 young people come each week in the summer to pray, talk, work and share stories. As I wandered around the site I began to notice the variety of messages inscribed on the T-shirts the young people were wearing. The first one I saw said boldly: 'It's all about *me*.' That didn't seem to be quite in the spirit of Taizé, I thought. But then I saw another: 'If found, please return to the pub.' We're still not there, I mused. I became more positive as I began to read the next. 'Devote yourself,' it started hopefully, 'to Heavy Metal,' it ended solemnly.

Finally, coming through the crowd, I saw a T-shirt that said simply: 'Love your enemies.' At last! Here was the authentic spirit of this special place. Here was the echo of Jesus.

We live in a spiritually confused culture. Liam Gallagher of the rock group Oasis once said in an interview,

I don't pray and I don't go to church but I'm intrigued by it, I dig it. I'm into the idea that there could be a God and aliens and incarnation and some geezer years ago turning water into wine. I don't believe when you die, you die. All the beautiful people who have been and gone – Lennon, Hendrix – they're somewhere else, man. Whether it's here or whether it's there, they're doing some musical thingummyjig. They got to be somewhere else, haven't they?<sup>1</sup>

It's hard to know where to start in deconstructing that statement, but it's not unusual to find 'pick'n'mix' believing. One article in *The Times* on spiritual gurus said,

In philosophy or spirituality gurus are our cocktail shakers – mixing up a bit of Buddhism, a touch of Kabbalah, some feng shui, a dash of wicca and a pinch of shamanism. So where

does that leave our traditional religious leaders, with their old-fashioned single-brand approach to theisms? Increasingly obsolete.<sup>2</sup>

Religion is being rebranded for the consumer age. There's a mini-industry of guru figures telling us how to take control of our lives with easy slogans: 'There is a power greater than you'; 'Open your heart to love'; 'The past is not the future.' Christian concepts are even slipping back on to the perfume counter: you can spray yourself with 'Purity' and cover your skin with 'Grace'.

However, the answer to profound complexity often lies in profound simplicity. To me, and to millions of others, that profound simplicity is found in the person of Jesus. 'Profound' because the Jesus I shall be exploring in this book is not just one who wants me for a sunbeam. 'Simplicity' because the experience of countless people is that when Jesus is put into the centre of our picture, the rest of life seems to rearrange itself rather satisfactorily.

Note how, even for Liam Gallagher, there in the middle of his observations is a reference to 'some geezer years ago turning water into wine'. Jesus is remarkable for his hold on the popular imagination. A recent survey by the company behind the cult television drama *Primeval* asked which people, now dead, the British would most like to meet. Princess Diana was second and William Shakespeare third, but the clear winner was Jesus Christ.

But who is this Jesus? It turns out that he is deeply elusive. People have tried to co-opt Jesus into their team ever since the stone was rolled away from the tomb, but they never actually manage to recruit him. In the famous words of Albert Schweitzer:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us in the same words: 'Follow me!' and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.<sup>3</sup>

It's undoubtedly true that we each have to come to our own understanding of this multi-faceted human being, and yet, through all the countless millions of words spoken and written about Jesus and the three brief years of his ministry, here is a genuine 'man for all seasons'. He has the ability to speak across ages and cultures, across glories and tragedies, across the entire sweep of human emotions, and to do so with a freshness and authenticity that no other person possesses. This book is an attempt to say why.

Here is a man who had no PR machine, no shadowy 'advisers', no lap-top, email or internet. He wrote no book, syndicated no newspaper articles, had no social networking site. He spoke to no more people in his lifetime than would fill the football stadium of a team in the lower reaches of the Championship. But he changed the world more than any person has ever done, and he touches the imagination of more people today than ever before.

The essayist R. W. Emerson said that 'the name of Jesus is not so much written as *ploughed* into the history of the world'. You can't miss him. Even at the trivial level one can see how ubiquitous the name of Jesus has become. When a golfer misses a golf putt it would be very strange if he were to shout 'Winston Churchill!' or when he stubs a toe to yell, 'Mahatma Gandhi!' The name of Jesus is everywhere.

As Philip Yancey points out, 'You can gauge the size of a ship that has passed out of sight by the huge wake it leaves behind,'<sup>4</sup> and you don't get a wake much bigger than Jesus'. This is the basic theme I want to explore in this book. The effect of Jesus on every layer of human experience is quite remarkable, however it is evaluated. He's the magnificent outsider who dominates the Gospels, striding through the pages of the New Testament with glorious freedom. He's the centre point of history, the pivot on which human affairs have so often turned. He's the transforming presence who has turned more lives upside down than anyone could dream of. He's the dynamic personality who has rewritten the rule-book of whole nations, re-framing their laws, their customs, their values, their politics. This Jesus is our partner in prayer and in pain. He's strangely crazy about his Church, and he's been the inspiration

of some of the greatest artistic achievements of humankind. Truly, the wake of this apparently minor figure from small-town Palestine has been spectacular in the extreme.

Let's see why.

I want to thank my editor at SPCK, Alison Barr, for believing in this project and not chiding me when it was inevitably late. I also want to thank my loyal chaplain, PA and secretary who patiently keep me on the road. Mainly, as ever, I want to thank my family for showing me the support, interest and encouragement that this jobbing bishop and negligent husband needs when the vapours come over him and he has to start writing. To them goes the credit for getting the book finished; to me goes the responsibility for all the errors of judgement and style.

But I believe in the product. Above all I believe in the subject – the living Jesus, who I try daily to follow.

# 1

## *Jesus – a personal obsession*

---

It's time I paid tribute to Sandra. She was my girlfriend in my last year at school. I was brought up in a fine Christian home and going to church was just what you did on Sundays. Through my teenage years the attraction was less about being in the choir and getting paid for weddings, and more about the girls you could meet at the youth club or among the young Sunday School teachers. I believed in God in a vague sort of way but preferred not to get too close. In any case, life held all sorts of vibrant opportunities and wasn't God inclined towards negativity?

But then Sandra began lending me books. They had strange titles, like *The Cross and the Switchblade* and *God's Smuggler*. I read them dutifully but found I was entering a world of Christian faith of which I knew very little. Here were dramatic tales of amazing events, of a God who acted decisively in human affairs, of a relationship with Jesus Christ which wasn't confined to bread and wine at an altar rail but was richly personal and transforming. It was all a bit much for me. I wrote in my list of book reviews (I was that kind of boy) that they were 'very interesting but not very Anglican'. I blush at the memory!

I fear that Sandra and I parted for no better reason than that I wanted a free run at university. Oxford was going to be a new world. But Sandra had made a decisive contribution to my life. She had opened up the possibility that I might be missing something rather crucial about Christianity, that it wasn't essentially something to do with doctrines and good behaviour but rather something to do with a relationship, and in particular, something to do with the living reality of Jesus Christ. The door was opening.

## *The Jesus I've been offered*

As I look back I can see a number of versions of Jesus that I've been offered through the years and the various stages of my journeying. They've all arrived from hidden places in our culture and presented themselves with varying degrees of credibility to my emerging world of ideas and beliefs.

### **Gentle Jesus**

Gentle Jesus is well known in Junior Churches and primary schools all around the Western world. In my own case he was clearly depicted in a picture on my bedroom wall – calm, wise, tall, with blue eyes and fair hair, a strong jaw-line and a strange taste in long white nighties. He seemed to be particularly friendly with little furry animals and birds that should have known better than to hop around on the hands of strangers. But of course this was no Stranger; this was Gentle Jesus, everybody's friend. He was oddly comforting at first but completely remote from my real world. He was epitomized by the words of the Christmas carol: 'Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he,' but it has to be said that such a manifesto was hardly attractive to a boy who wanted to play cricket for England and climb Everest. If I got too close to this Jesus, would I have to drink fruit juice at parties and have a cold shower every time I thought of girls? This Jesus wasn't going to go very far in my life.

### **Judge Jesus**

Judge Jesus is alive and well in the dark corners of many minds in traditional Christendom. He particularly afflicts young people in their early teens. He and I got acquainted almost without an introduction. He was just there, watching me with slightly narrowed eyes, not actively intervening but almost certainly disapproving as I struggled through my teenage years. I thought the best way to handle this was to keep my distance and whistle confidently. Gerard Hughes tells of a young married man who lived worthily and simply; he and his wife spent most of their

holidays going to Christian conferences. Hughes encouraged him to meditate on the story of the marriage feast at Cana in John 2. He saw tables heaped with food set out beneath a blue sky. The guests were dancing and it was a scene of life and enjoyment. ‘Did you see Christ?’ Hughes asked. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘Christ was sitting upright on a straight-backed chair, clothed in a white robe, a staff in his hand, a crown of thorns on his head, looking disapproving.’<sup>1</sup> As Gerard Hughes points out, if he had been asked what image of God he carried in his mind the young man would probably have talked about a God of love, mercy and compassion, but another subconscious image of God was effectively operating in his life, as it does in many devout Christian lives. Judge Jesus is a tyrannical figure who can do great damage if he is allowed to follow us around constantly flourishing a yellow card, getting ready for the Great Day when he can finally send us off the field with a grim red one.

### **National Trust Jesus**

National Trust Jesus is much more benign and really rather well brought up. The great thing about this Jesus is that he’s very understated. His churches are a delight to visit occasionally to remind oneself of one’s heritage and the virtues of ‘the old services’. This Jesus is frozen in time, but usually in a time which never existed. You don’t actually need a National Trust card to visit him but you do feel you shouldn’t turn up uninvited. Someone once called the Church of England ‘the Church that’s dying of good taste’. The Jesus I encountered later would almost certainly be respectful of the church-as-National-Trust-property, but he would then most likely go down to the pub and watch the football on Sky. However, in my teens I was on nodding terms with this ‘Lilliput Lane’ Jesus. He was, after all, innocuous.

### **Living Jesus**

A strange thing happened to me at university. Thanks to my wonderful Christian parents and the preparatory softening-up by Sandra

I was ready to encounter the living Jesus when I was offered an intellectually credible and emotionally satisfying portrait of the man-in-the-middle of the Christian story. Afterwards I wondered how I could have gone so long without seeing that, although I had lots of pieces of the Christian jigsaw, I had never tried to put them together, nor had I realized that I didn't have the big central piece, the one called Jesus. As I thought, listened, read, talked, and finally put that big piece in the centre, so I found that this Jesus stepped off the pages of the New Testament and into my life. It was a Copernican revolution. Instead of having Jesus circling around my sun at a respectably safe distance, now Jesus was the sun and I circled him with varying degrees of trust. I found some words years later which still speak for me. Douglas Webster was a canon of St Paul's and he once spent a dismal winter's day reading Bertrand Russell's book *Why I Am Not a Christian*. He then wrote a brief essay which begins:

I am a Christian because of Jesus Christ, and for no other conscious reason. I find him unforgettable. I cannot get him out of my system. I do not know how he got there, but I am thankful that he did. I am a Christian because of Jesus Christ, especially because of the way he lived and the way he died, what his death did, and what he did with death in resurrection.

I agree.

### **Terminator Jesus**

Terminator Jesus then made a surprise appearance. It's possible to be so impressed with the new-found energy of faith and the powerful nature of its central figure that we start to believe, and to live as if, 'my God is better than your God'. When we meet opposition we may be tempted to face up to the confrontation and say, 'Wait till I put my tanks on your lawn!' Or even, if defeated, to mutter darkly, 'I'll be back!' Terminator Jesus is an initially attractive figure. He sometimes reappears when the religious right supports international adventures such as the invasion of Iraq.

Here the tanks are chariots of fire leading God's Righteous People to victory. When the television pictures show an 'enemy' target disappearing in a puff of smoke, the Righteous cheer and quote the book of Revelation. But Terminator Jesus doesn't measure up well to the picture of a man on a cross, crying in the darkness. When the gap between these pictures of Jesus becomes too great, one of them has to go. I stuck with the Bible.

### **Professor Jesus**

Professor Jesus is undoubtedly a wise and good man. I met him first at theological college. He took me into the domain of hard, critical thought and wouldn't let me off the intellectual hook. He introduced me to the tools of academic theology and fired my theological curiosity, which has lasted ever since. It has to be said, though, that Professor Jesus sometimes needs to be let out to play and to relax. He certainly needs to tie study together with the life of prayer and practical action. But, then, he's used to that. He's been doing it all his long (pre-existent) life.

### **Jesus, the Hon. Member for Galilee South**

This political Jesus had been lurking in the wings for a while but he emerged more clearly when I went to be a curate in the middle of Birmingham. The human flotsam and jetsam of city life would often drift to the Bull Ring, looking for help. The homeless, the addicted, the desperate – they all had a story to tell, and very often the finger of blame pointed to society and its attitudes as well as to their own personal responsibility. I remember when a night shelter had to close down and people were found dead on the streets. I was there when the IRA pub bombs went off a few hundred yards from our church. I also remember a service in which we took a very long roll of paper and ran it from the pulpit all the way to the west door of our very large church, with an imaginary pencil mark on every inch of its length. How far would that roll of paper need to go so that there was a pencil mark for every hungry person in the world, we asked. To Coventry, London, Dover? The answer was – to Australia, with every inch

of the distance representing one desperate human story. These and other seminal experiences convinced me that the message of the kingdom of God was not just one of personal and spiritual significance but one of prime social and political urgency. It was a declaration that the true 'framing story' for the world is one where Jesus is Lord and not Caesar, and the kingdom of God stands as a glowing alternative to the shabby, selfish and oppressive kingdoms of this world. I'm still working this out; I always will be. Perhaps Jesus as the Hon. Member for Galilee South is a bit misleading. I don't believe either Jesus or the contemporary Church can afford to be politically affiliated to a party; Christians have to be affiliated only to Jesus and the kingdom. Nevertheless, there are some who break that rule, on the right and the left. Lord Soper was once asked if he thought it was possible for a Tory to go to heaven. There was a long silence. Eventually Lord Soper said, 'It probably is, but personally I wouldn't want to take such a risk with my immortal soul.'

I hope these various representations of Jesus make the point sufficiently clearly. We can be faced with many depictions of Jesus and we need wisdom to sift the truest, most enlivening pictures of the elusive Stranger who also, amazingly, said to his followers, 'I have called you friends' (John 15.15). But if those are some of the pictures of Jesus that I've been offered, what about the Jesus I've found?

### *The Jesus I've found*

Jesus is much too rich a figure to be bound by any one ecclesiastical tradition. I feel I've benefited from many different dimensions of Jesus shown to me by diverse parts of God's universal Church. You wouldn't expect 2,000 million people all to have the same experience of God or to want to express that faith in the same way. So the truth about Jesus spills over into the many cracked containers we offer him. This is some of what I've found.

## **Jesus the generous evangelical**

John Wesley said that on 24 May 1738 at 8.45, when listening to someone reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans at an evening meeting, he felt his heart was 'strangely warmed' and he finally handed his life over in trust to Jesus Christ. Not many people can date their turning to Christ so precisely but many can speak of a time when their faith journey underwent a step-change. I couldn't be precise myself but I know that two weekends at university were seminal and I decided to try living with Jesus Christ as the still point of my turning world.

The evangelicalism I experienced was strong and generous. The important features were the worth and wisdom of the Bible, the centrality of the cross and resurrection as the breakthrough to freedom, the value of making a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ, the importance of daily disciplines of Bible reading and prayer. I remain deeply grateful for these affirmations, all of which I try to live by. I found an evangelicalism that was graceful and welcoming. Doubtless it had its dark side, but I experienced its freedom and light. It was genuinely life-changing. In my case it took me from a career in law to ordination in the Church of England, and I have never regretted that choice for a moment (well, maybe for a moment as I've pulled on a coat for yet another winter evening meeting, but nothing that a day off and a glass of wine couldn't cure). At the centre of this faith has been the compelling figure of Jesus. Evangelicalism keeps on pointing back to this fascinating and deeply attractive person who appeared among us as God's self-portrait, God's first and last Word, and the key-holder to life in abundance. But my journey didn't stop there.

## **Jesus the earthy catholic**

Don't get me wrong with the word 'earthy'. I'm just trying to avoid using the word 'incarnational' too soon. As I journeyed on in ministry as a diocesan youth officer and a vicar in Somerset, I found of course that some of my best friends drew on a more

world-centred theology and more sacramental worship. I loved the reverence shown in the Eucharist; something profound was obviously going on there. As one woman stammered out to me, ‘That service; it’s a ball of fire.’ Worship was full of theatre and song, of colour and rich smells, of order and beauty. The ministry that flowed from this deep source was profoundly committed to the welfare of individuals and communities; the bond was intense, never casual. The Church is not a collection of congregations but a holy community, a mystical body. Above all, God’s love for the world is incarnated in Jesus, and thus all life and all creation takes on permanent value. Again, Jesus is central and encountered most tellingly in the Eucharist, the constant point of reference for the catholic. I have drawn deeply from this well of faithfulness.

### **Jesus the Spirit-led ‘charismatic’**

In the 1970s the ‘charismatic movement’ was disrupting the established patterns of all our churches. Without so much as a by-your-leave the Spirit seemed to be turning people and churches upside down, like a distant cousin coming into our well-ordered living room and moving all the furniture around, uninvited. But if this was more of the reality of Jesus then I wanted it, so I opened myself to what was known as ‘baptism in the Spirit’. And nothing happened. It took me a while to be content that it was God’s job to be God. If God wanted to give or withhold that experience then that should be fine by me. God treats us with respect and care; what suits someone else would not suit me. Nevertheless, I was much enriched by the new focus on the work of the living Spirit of Jesus. Worship was loosened up; new, more personal music was released into the Church; people found fresh reality in their well-trodden and perhaps tired paths of faith. Eyes were closed in worship; arms were raised in praise (so much so that the joke went around ‘All those who want coffee, put your hands down’). There was much excitement in the air. The intensity has cooled, of course, as the emphasis on the life and work of the Spirit has entered the main bloodstream of the churches. What

God has done is to remind the Church of a neglected truth. God reminded me too.

### **Jesus the thoughtful liberal**

I much regret that the word ‘liberal’ has become a slur in some quarters of the Church. I’ve always valued the idea of being open-minded and free to think. Jesus was a liberal in his re-framing of inherited Judaism. He stood free of traditional intellectual and ritual constraints in order to apply the wisdom of God to the world he now inhabited, which was different from the world of the wilderness wanderings in which the law had first been laid down through Moses. The label ‘liberal’ ought to be worn with courage and a smile. Liberals want to take the world seriously, just as Jesus did. They want to use the best knowledge from the natural and social sciences in order to enrich their understanding of God’s world and God’s sustaining of it. I won’t give up the word ‘liberal’ without a fight (while turning the other cheek, of course!).

Where the ‘centre of gravity’ for an evangelical will be *the Bible* and for a catholic, *tradition*, for a liberal that centre of gravity is likely to be *reason* (applied to the Bible and mediated through the tradition). We need all three emphases in rigorous and playful interaction. The observant reader may perhaps have noticed that I have now enlisted Jesus as an Anglican! Those three strands of classic Anglican theological method have served that Church well. It’s good to think that Jesus might have felt at home there too.

Brian McLaren says,

To be a Christian in a generously orthodox way is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving community of people who are seeking the truth on the road of mission, and who have been launched on the quest by Jesus, who, with us, guides us still. Do we have it? Have we taken hold of it? Not fully, not yet, of course not. But we keep seeking. We’re finding enough to keep us going. But we’re not finished.<sup>2</sup>

of some of the greatest artistic achievements of humankind. Truly, the wake of this apparently minor figure from small-town Palestine has been spectacular in the extreme.

Let's see why.

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