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# GLORIOUS CHRISTIANITY

*Walking by faith in  
the life to come*



Cally Hammond

**SPCK**

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*For Huw Jones and Richard Howells,  
dear friends, upstanding Welshmen,  
and fellow servants of the servants of God*



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# Introduction

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*John 21.25, RSV*

There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

*Hebrews 13.8, 20–21, RSV*

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever . . .

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

## *What is a Christian?*

I have been asking lots of people this question, and I've had an astonishing range of answers in reply. It could never be an easy question, because I insist that the answer has to be only one sentence long, so a lot of those who respond go away first and think hard about the matter before they give me their answer. It's not exactly scientific, I know, but that range of answers suggests that there is no consensus within grass-roots Christianity about what being a Christian really means. And at first that might seem to be rather worrying. If we don't know what Christians *are*, how can we know if we are being Christians in the right kind of way – whether that means doing it properly or doing it enough?

In fact I find this lack of consensus highly encouraging. It suggests that Christians are *not* people who define themselves by means of a check-list, either of 'correct' beliefs or of 'correct' behaviour. Some people have answered my question by referring to the Bible, or to the Church, or to their upbringing and education. Others start by rejecting a negative, telling me what a Christian is not – they point to their dislike of outsiders' prejudices about what a Christian is

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(‘God-botherers’, ‘Jesus-freaks’, ‘Bible-bashers’). But the overwhelming majority of people who respond centre their reply on the person of Jesus himself. Very few people point first to the Trinity or the Scriptures. It is Jesus the man, the living human person, who has changed their lives when they first encountered him; and who continues to shape their beliefs, choices and lifestyle.

Christians are people who are convinced that there existed once a man called Jesus, who was known locally as Jesus son of Joseph (or, in his own language, Yeshua ben Yosef); that he was a teacher and healer in his own community; that he went to Jerusalem and got himself crucified by the Romans during the Jewish Passover festival. This took place in the days when the Emperor Tiberius Caesar ruled the known world (AD 14–37) and when a Roman called Pontius Pilate was governor over the quarrelsome province of Judaea (AD 26–36).

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Christians are people who believe that Jesus was a man (a real human person in historical time), but much, much more than that as well – because they have encountered him in their own lives. These encounters with Jesus take many forms, and are not usually based on the intellectual belief that Jesus rose from the dead and lives for ever at God’s right hand. They are extremely difficult to put into words, or to explain. But they are powerful enough, and effective enough, to *make* people Christians and to *keep* people Christians.

So what is a Christian? If we turn to the Bible record of how it all began, we find that the first time the disciples of Jesus were given that special name was soon after his death: ‘in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians’ (Acts 11.26, rsv). Those first followers were not called after his personal name, Jesus, but after his title or job description, ‘Christ’. This means someone who has been specially marked with oil as a token of the task to which God has called him. The Greek word for one marked with oil in such a way

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is *christos*. In Hebrew it is *messiah*. These two words have come to be titles, 'Christ' and 'Messiah', and are so familiar that it is sometimes hard to keep in mind their true, original meaning. In particular we tend to think of 'Christ' as if it were Jesus' surname, rather than a description of his identity or his calling. Which is natural enough; after all, the system of calling people by a Christian name and a surname has developed in English in a similar way – many English surnames were originally job descriptions, or markers of function (Miller, Carter, Mason, Fletcher, Taylor, Cook, etc.).

When we think about calling Jesus 'anointed' or 'Christ', we have to get ourselves into the mindset of someone living in Bible times if we are to understand what the use of oil is supposed to be telling us. To use oil as a substance for marking things turns out to be highly significant. Oil leaves a stain which does not wash off, whether on fabric or on stone. To pour oil on something or someone is to mark them *indelibly* – the mark cannot be removed.<sup>1</sup> So to call yourself a 'Christian' means first that you recognize Jesus as God's anointed Son, and then that you yourself have been anointed – just as the oil leaves an indelible external mark, so the Holy Spirit leaves an indelible mark, though one which is not visible in ordinary sight. Because of this indelible mark, being a Christian means being different for ever, never being the same again. None of the challenges of life in the world around is different, none of the faults and habits of sin within you is different, but you have a new heart and a new spirit, and a calling and purpose in life.

If you are using this book for a post-Easter discussion or prayer group, perhaps you are thinking it's a bit late to start wondering *now* what a Christian is. But it is exactly now, in the immediate aftermath of the resurrection, that the friends and followers of the man Jesus began to see themselves as new, different, set apart, called and chosen. They began to explore a new way of relating to God, and to discover God's universal message of love for all the peoples of the world. They came to see themselves as the messengers (the Greek word for messengers is the same as the word for 'angels') of the good news of

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<sup>1</sup> That is why anointing is still the most sacred part of the coronation of a new monarch – following the example of the Old Testament kings like Saul and David (1 Samuel 10.1; 16.13).

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God's love. More than their loyalty, belief or support, more even than their racial origin, they were drawn together by their discipleship as followers of the man they recognized as Christ.

This, I think, is how God still wants us to see ourselves as Christians today. We are to be messengers of his love, his good news (which in the older English phrasing is termed 'gospel'). What's more, I think we have to try and see this with fresh eyes, to see past the clutter of old arguments – do you have to have a 'conversion experience' to be a real Christian? Do you need to be 'born again'? There is more than one way to discover that God calls us; and more than one way to proclaim his love for us. I think it is one of the unfortunate side effects of Christianity having emerged from Judaism (like a competitive younger brother or sister who needs to prove him- or herself) that Christians so easily spoke, and still speak, the language of oppression, victimization and persecution. It is an identity which fits that time of formation and self-defence against older ways well, but which in our time can encourage a siege mentality, of hostility to outsiders and suspicion of people who are not Christians.

In Bible times, the god(s) you worshipped depended on where you lived and what your racial origin was. If you were from Rome, your gods were Roman gods, who protected that city. If you came from Egypt, your gods had Egyptian names and were tied to that land and its people. If you were Jewish, your god (who had a name, but no one had spoken it for centuries, with the result that nowadays no one knows exactly how to say it any more) lived in the temple in Jerusalem and so that was where you went to make your offerings and seek divine help. This meant that in those days, for most people, religion was not something you could easily take with you wherever you went. One of the reasons the first Christians annoyed the Romans so much was that they claimed to be a proper religion, but did not follow the rules by behaving the way a proper religion would be expected to – they had no impressive temple or buildings; they did not practise blood sacrifice; they did not even have a racial identity – anyone, from anywhere, could become a Christian. It was radical democratic religion; and above all it was *portable* religion – it needed no special religious expertise. One of its most distinctive features was an enthusiasm for getting together in groups, for activities like singing and prayer. And in the Roman Empire that could spell trouble.

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So the distinctive markers of the first Christians were these:

- a sense of shared loyalty to the man Jesus;
- a conviction that he was more than a man, and that he had overcome death;
- a belief that all who followed him would somehow participate in that conquest of death;
- a custom of meeting together for praise and worship both of God and of his Son the Messiah;
- the ability to carry their faith with them, and to spread the good news of Jesus and his victory wherever they went.

In a remarkably short time, these Christians had developed their own religious practices too, distinct from their Jewish origins. They had forms of worship which had an air of mystery about them, because non-believers were excluded (such as baptism and Holy Communion). They also developed ethical principles which were meant to promote harmonious coexistence and to regulate their common life, many of which were based on Jewish teachings like the Ten Commandments. And they also built up a leadership system which was quite unlike anything the world had seen before. The Christian leaders at first were the twelve apostles; but as time went on successors had to be found, to carry on the apostles' work, and to oversee the well-being of the Christians. These leaders were called overseers and elders (the Greek words give us 'bishops' and 'presbyters'), and they strengthened the sense of purpose and direction among their flocks as well as keeping them true to the fundamental beliefs and teachings of Christianity. They were not chosen because of their noble ancestry or privileged rank, but through a common recognition of their calling, marked and authorized by the Holy Spirit. Such a leadership, based on quality and excellence rather than wealth or rank, was extremely radical for its time, allowing those with talent to come to the fore, regardless of their origins. This was bound to prove more successful than the alternative of being a religious authority merely because of your family background or political office.

Those first Christians were not marked out by their racial identity – you could not spot them by the colour of their skin, the language they spoke or the style of their clothing. They did not, in those very early days, wear crosses or other symbols openly to declare their religious allegiance to all the world. Yet they had no difficulty

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recognizing one another through their shared patterns of belief and behaviour. Above everything else they were distinctive for acclaiming the man Jesus as *more than a man* – as having a cosmic and eternal significance in God’s plan; as being God’s own Son; as having overcome death; and as having enabled his followers to share in the resurrection life.

This book explores what it means to be a Christian through the glorious mysteries, a traditional prayer which provides (instead of a set form of words) five fragments from Scripture for meditation:

- the resurrection
- the Ascension
- the coming of the Holy Spirit
- falling asleep
- crowning.

The five fragments, or glimpses, have been drawn together into one prayer, to complete the series begun with the joyful mysteries (focused on the Incarnation) and the sorrowful mysteries (focused on the crucifixion). For centuries this pattern of fragments has helped Christians to see how they are part of God’s plan for humankind; to see how the life and death and resurrection of the man Jesus has meaning for them, in their time, in their life.

The first two glorious mysteries are extremely familiar from the Scriptures; they belong to Easter and its aftermath – the new beginning for God’s people, the fulfilment of the promises. The last two have traditionally been associated with Mary the mother of Jesus, in the sense of seeing her as standing for us, for redeemed humankind, for everyone who has recognized Jesus for who he really is, and who has decided to live his or her life in the light of that new understanding. Between the mysteries focused on Jesus and those focused on redeemed humanity there is a pivotal mystery – and it faces in both directions, pointing back into human time and forward into divine eternity. Indeed, the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was for precisely that reason, to connect two apparent opposites, divinity and humanity, in an eternal bond, in a way that could never be broken – thus establishing a channel of communication which would never, and will never, fall silent.

Praying the glorious mysteries, more than the two meditations which precede it (the joyful and sorrowful mysteries, which I explored

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in my earlier books *Joyful Christianity* and *Passionate Christianity*) makes demands on our imagination which we cannot ever fulfil. It calls us to imagine heaven, our eternal and abiding home. It urges us to contemplate the miracle of miracles, from which Christianity was born – even though that miracle is never actually described in the whole of the New Testament! It also brings us into potential conflict (not for the first time in this series of meditations) with the world of science, and the realm of the ‘probable’. This book is not about bridging the faith–science divide. It is much more about faith’s journey in search of understanding. For God gave us our intelligence, and the means to use it wisely – the love of learning, of coming-to-understand, is of the very essence of our human nature.

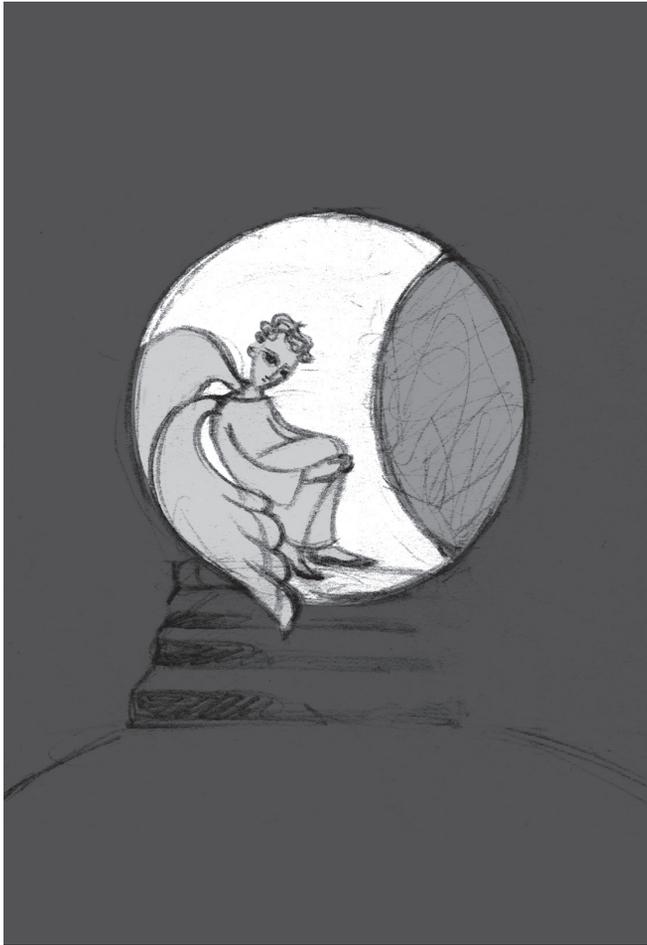
Some Christians find the whole idea of resurrection a stumbling block. This is hardly surprising; the resurrection of a crucified criminal as God’s anointed one was clearly a stumbling block in Bible days too (1 Corinthians 1.23). Such Christians may quietly omit that part of the Creed when worshippers declare ‘I believe in the resurrection of the dead: and the life of the world to come’. This book is not meant to argue them into faith, or cajole them into saying what they find difficult or impossible. It is more an expression of faith as I understand it, and the reasons why I think that faith is reasonable, than an attempt to make everyone think exactly the same. So instead of making people feel that they can’t be part of the Church any more because they don’t believe in the right things, in the right way, we can find that it is possible, and acceptable to God, if we can simply manage to take some things on trust, rather than demanding nothing less than 100 per cent certainty. In the course of five chapters, taking each of the glorious mysteries in turn, I will make my way through some difficult terrain. I shall take as my guide the Scriptures, the wisdom of Christian tradition and the living faith of the present moment. Just as it is difficult to find a single answer to the question ‘What is a Christian?’, so it is also difficult to come to a single agreed reason for trusting in the message of Christian faith. In both cases we turn, for help, to the man Jesus, who was, and who is, so much more than just a man; and who shows us the way we must follow, the truth we need to guide us, and the life which will, in due time, be ours.



*Of Heaven*

O Beauteous God, uncircumscribed treasure  
Of an eternal pleasure,  
Thy Throne is seated far  
Above the highest Star,  
Where thou prepar'st a glorious place  
Within the brightness of thy face  
For every spirit  
To inherit  
That builds his hopes on thy merit,  
And loves thee with a holy charity.  
What ravish'd heart, Seraphick tongue or eyes,  
Clear as the mornings rise,  
Can speak, or think, or see  
That bright eternity?  
Where the great Kings transparent Throne,  
Is of an intire Jasper stone:  
There the eye  
O'th'Chrysolite,  
And a sky  
Of Diamonds, Rubies, Chrysoprase,  
And above all, thy holy face  
Makes an eternal Clarity,  
When thou thy Jewels up dost binde: that day  
Remember us, we pray,  
That where the Beryl lyes  
And the Crystal, 'bove the skyes,  
There thou may'st appoint us place  
Within the brightness of thy face;  
And our Soul  
In the Scrowl  
Of life and blissfulness enrowl,  
That we may praise thee to eternity.  
Allelujah.

Jeremy Taylor (1613–67)



# 1

## *Resurrection*

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### *Luke 23.50—24.11, RSV*

Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their purpose and deed, and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel; and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise.' And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

### *1 Corinthians 15.3–8, RSV*

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he

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