

WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE
An introductory booklet series



Jesus Christ

Introduction

Jesus at the Heart of the New Testament

Who Was Jesus?

The Death & Resurrection of Jesus

The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

Like Us – But Not Like Us



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Introduction

There is no doubt that Jesus Christ existed. There's more information available about his life than about most other people of his time. It's also clear what he believed and taught. So our challenge is to decide whether he was sane or deluded and whether his teachings were true or false. No matter what conclusions are reached by any individual it can't be denied that Jesus changed the course of history and affected the lives of more people than anyone else.



'Anno Domini' –
'in the year of the Lord'

The great Greek thinker, Plato, lived in the fifth century B.C. We live in the 21st century A.D. What do these terms, 'B.C.' and 'A.D.' mean? The first stands for 'Before Christ'; the second is a shortened form of the Latin words 'Anno Domini' – 'in the year of the Lord'. Our calendars record events as happening before or after the birth of Jesus Christ. No one else has had such a profound impact upon history. No one else has so changed people's thinking that time itself is spoken of as happening before or after his or her birth.

The calendar is not the only thing which is hinged upon the life of Jesus. Throughout the centuries thinkers have studied his thoughts; artists, musicians and writers have produced great works which celebrate his life and death; other people, who may not be gifted in those ways, have believed in him and tried to live as he wanted them to live. Some have even died for him – because his words and actions satisfied their hunger for truth and love. They believed him when he said,

'I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst' (Jn. 6:35).

Jesus was needed by his people at a particular time in history. He is still needed now. That is why all history is dated in relation to his coming.

Being a Christian Isn't Always Easy

Until 313 A.D. it was illegal to be a Christian. Those early followers of Jesus believed in a teaching which threatened the State. They didn't accept the notion that Emperors or Kings were gods. They wouldn't offer sacrifices to the nature-spirits, or to the sun, or moon. They refused to believe that the poor should stay at the bottom of the rubbish-heap. For these and other reasons it was against the law for people to be Christian. As a result, many of them were hunted down like animals, tortured and put to death in most fearful ways.

Jesus knew that some of his faithful followers would be hounded like this. 'If they persecuted me they will persecute you too,' he said once – many individual ordeals and the great campaigns of terror which were launched against early Christians by the State demonstrated that his words were true.

If it was humanly possible to crush the small seed of Christianity beneath the State's boot then it would surely have been crushed. But it wasn't. Instead, it spread like wildfire throughout the world. Faithful Christians took the message of Jesus everywhere they went. Then one day it reached Aotearoa New Zealand.

Why Didn't Christianity Die Out?

Every year brings changes – changes of fashion, changes of lifestyle, changes of governments and ways of doing things. But some things don't change. Our deepest needs for such things as love and understanding never change. Nor does the hope that we will make a success of our lives. New fashions, new governments, new inventions don't satisfy these deep needs in us. Something more is needed. Something much more profound.

Christians believe that Jesus Christ and his message are the only means we have for satisfying our hunger for truth, our thirst for justice, love and compassion. They don't think of Jesus as someone who lived and died a long time ago but as someone who is alive now – helping us, befriending us. That is why Christians want to share that news, the Good News, with others.



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Jesus at the Heart of the New Testament



When he began speaking publicly crowds of people gathered to listen

Jesus seemed to be an ordinary person. He wasn't highly educated. He was a village carpenter who lived in Palestine and, for a short time, was a religious teacher there. In particular, he wanted to move the Jewish religion onto a different track. He attracted a group of followers, mainly from Galilee, and taught them the things that were important to him. When he began speaking publicly crowds of people gathered to listen. They grew more and more excited about what they heard or the remarkable things they saw him do – especially his miraculous healing of people with illnesses and diseases. Many of them even came to believe that he was the saviour promised to them by God. But their image of the saviour was that of a political leader who would drive the hated Roman armies out of their country. Because Jesus attracted a great following he was soon considered a threat to both the Roman leaders and, especially, to the leaders of Israel. So, after an unjust trial he was sentenced to die by being nailed to a cross (a form of punishment which was commonly used for criminals). He was in his thirties when he was put to death.

These few facts don't explain the remarkable influence which he has had on the world ever since his death in Jerusalem. Nor do they explain why his birth should be taken as the beginning of a new age of the calendar.

A fuller explanation is found in the New Testament. These writings of the first followers of Jesus explain what effect his words and actions had upon people when he was alive. They describe his trial and death in reasonably close detail. Finally, they also give some information about the events which made him such a truly unique figure in the world's history – his rising from the dead, his return to God his Father, and his promise of God's Spirit to continue the work which he had undertaken.

The earliest writings in the New Testament were letters of Paul, who originally persecuted the Christians and then became one of the greatest of them. He wrote to the early Christian communities, explaining what it truly meant to be a follower of Jesus and advising them about problems which they met in their lives or in the circumstances of the communities to which they belonged. The New Testament holds letters by other apostles too, but the letters of Paul are especially important not merely because there are more of them, or because they are the earliest and the longest, but because they give a fuller development of some of the teachings of Jesus than any of the other writings.

The Acts of the Apostles is a short history of the activities of the first close followers of Jesus – it shows the growth of the earliest Christian communities and how, inspired by the apostles, they spread from Jerusalem to other parts of the Roman Empire.

The four Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John describe the activities and mission of Jesus. They tell what God has already done for his people, what he is doing through his Son, and what he will yet do. John's version of the Gospel, a true love story, was one of the last pieces of writing.

The final book of the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. What it reveals proved to be a challenge and a consolation to Christians. It predicted that, like Jesus, they would undergo suffering; but it also assured them that their courage and faithfulness would earn them the glory and the companionship of Jesus himself and the love and companionship of the Father.

It shouldn't be thought that the entire teaching of Jesus was given at one time. It was given gradually. Initially Jesus revealed only a few things; then, as time passed, more and more. But his revelation ended with his ascension and with the sending of the Spirit of God at Pentecost. Of course his followers didn't understand everything immediately. Many things became clear to them

only after he died. That process of understanding is still taking place today. The Spirit is still alive in the Church and assists it to make plain the hidden treasures of the revelation contained in the Bible.

Non-Catholic Christians regard the Bible as the only source of truth. But Catholics are guided both by the Bible, which was a book commissioned by the Church (it was completed by the 4th century) and also by the Church's traditional teaching formulated by assemblies of the popes and bishops in the centuries following the Bible's compilation.

The Bible and the Tradition of the Church comprise the living source through which the Spirit leads believers into the truth, century after century, as Jesus promised.



The Bible and the
Tradition of the Church

'The Literal Truth'

Today's scholars agree that the New Testament states accurately how Jesus was regarded by his very first followers, the people who listened to him and saw him. As far as we know, Jesus didn't write down his teachings. Nor did his followers. For the first decades they depended on memory and the oral tradition of the first disciples. Such a tradition can be accurate, as any Kaumatua can tell you. Only later and gradually did the early followers of Jesus develop a literature of their own.

Some of the Gospel writers tell their stories slightly differently, and sometimes the language they have Jesus speak is slightly different. But these are merely details which can be explained by the fact that different writers were writing for different audiences, or basing their stories on the accounts of different people. Yet what emerges from them all is a single, consistent account of what Jesus did and said, and a remarkably clear portrait of him. Something else which emerges from the New Testament



the oral tradition of
the first disciples

is the fact that there can be only one faith, only one way of believing in Jesus, only one true group of followers.

The early Christians obviously wanted to preserve the story and teachings of Jesus exactly as they observed them at first hand or heard about them from others. In the year 57 A.D., for example, Paul made precisely this point when he wrote to the Christian community in Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so promptly turning away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are going over to a different gospel – not that it is another gospel; except that there are trouble-makers among you who are seeking to pervert the gospel of Christ.

But even if we ourselves or an angel from heaven preaches to you a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let God's curse be on him.

I repeat again what we declared before: anyone who preaches to you a gospel other than the one you were first given is to be under God's curse (Gal. 1:6-9).

His message was the same as that of the first apostles. He had already taken pains to check it out with James, Peter and John. It was, he assured the readers of his letter, 'the literal truth'.

Read Mark's gospel completely in one session. What impresses you about Jesus?



Who Was Jesus?

Our information about Jesus is gathered mainly from the four versions of the Gospel written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These have been mentioned earlier and will be mentioned again. Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judaea, during the reign of King Herod. His mother was a village maiden named Mary, but he had no human father. Catholics believe that he was conceived as a result of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel writers all agree that God was his father. His foster-father was a village carpenter named Joseph.

This means that God came among us as one of us. God became human out of love for us. The Son of God was a man. Another way of putting it is that the one person, Jesus Christ, was both divine and human. Jesus wasn't God who adopted a human appearance: he was truly one of us. Nor was he a man who claimed to be God: he truly was God. Catholics call this extraordinary mystery 'the Incarnation' because Jesus, the Father's Son in eternity, became one of us; he had flesh and blood just like us.

From the beginning Jesus lived among ordinary people and so he knew the hardships that ordinary people often have to endure. Even the circumstances of his birth were difficult, because Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem when she was already carrying him. A census was being taken *and everyone went to be registered, each in his own town (Lk. 2:3)*. There was no accommodation available – certainly none for this humble couple – and so Mary gave birth to her son in a place used for sheltering animals. It was there that, after the birth, she *wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the living-space (Lk. 2:7)*.



The new-born child was born in a stable

The new-born child was born in a stable and laid in a food-tray where animals eat because there was no other

home for him. So it is not surprising, as Luke tells us, that the child's first visitors were a group of shepherds. By telling us this Luke was actually telling us something else as well. At the time he wrote, shepherds were not looked on with much favour. They weren't considered respectable. Thus Luke was suggesting that Jesus, who was later to be described as the Good Shepherd, would, when he grew up, associate with sinners and other people who were no more respectable than shepherds.

A few other stories survive about his childhood. It is said, for example, that when Herod, the Jewish king, learned about the boy's birth he tried to have him killed because he feared a rival to his throne, but that Joseph and Mary took refuge in Egypt. They left Egypt only when Herod died. Again something else is being hinted at, because in later life Jesus would claim to be a king and his claim would be interpreted by some as a threat to the authority of earth's kings.

When Mary and Joseph returned with the boy Jesus they went to Nazareth. Today we might think of Nazareth as an underdeveloped place. Work then, as now, was a struggle between dawn and dusk. The Galilean cottage of that time was a primitive one-room building. This remarkable family lived in poverty there – as so many do throughout the world today. Their example shows that being poor is not an obstacle to God. Being poor, in fact, may be a channel to God, because money and property can cause people to imagine that they can get by on their own. Society may respect wealth, success and importance, but society is always wrong if it values people in terms of the things they possess. In fact, poverty, failure and insignificance may be the very qualities which draw us to God and God to us.

Later it will be shown that justice demands that we help people who are poor, so it isn't being claimed here that poverty is good for anyone. But what is being said is that being poor doesn't block the flow of God's love to us – it may even turn it into a torrent.



Joseph and Mary took
refuge in Egypt

Jesus was born into and brought up in a poor family. That may be why the poor have often showed a special love for him.

Jesus Becomes a Teacher



a village carpenter

One reason why we are told little about the childhood and early life of Jesus is because the Gospel isn't a biography. It really takes off when, as a young man, he began speaking and teaching publicly. (Before that he had been, like his foster-father Joseph, a village carpenter.)

He told gatherings of people that the kingdom which God had promised so long ago had finally come. He assured them that he had been sent by God to tell them this Good News. Then he did some astonishing things which seemed to prove that he was teaching with God's authority – in particular, he healed people of illnesses by means of a word or a touch. He assured all his listeners that God had sent him to save them from their sins, their illnesses, their deaths. He invited some people to become his companions. These were the first disciples.

After a time he expanded his teaching. He began telling people more and more about God's kingdom, about his own work, about the kinds of lives which they were expected to lead if they were truly to be the People of God. But he especially revealed these things to his disciples, since they loved him and wanted to believe him and do what he asked.

**John 7:1
-8:59**

what he said wasn't
acceptable to everybody

But what he said wasn't acceptable to everybody. The challenge was too great for some and they left his company. The leaders of the Jews at first became uneasy and then more angry because he claimed that they were leading the people astray and didn't truly know God. Eventually he revealed that he was God's Son – a claim which so enraged them that they plotted to have him arrested and put to death.

The Last Supper

For some time Jesus had been telling his followers privately that when he died he would rise to life again after three days. He wouldn't leave them fearful and undefended.

He had also been planning to nourish them with real food, as is implied in John 6. On that occasion he had been preaching to a very large audience. When he finished speaking he knew that they would be hungry, so he took five loaves and two fish that a boy gave him and miraculously multiplied them into sufficient food to feed everybody.

It was when he ate with his closest friends for the last time that he tried very hard to explain to them the meaning of the suffering which was shortly to overwhelm him. He also revealed his great love for them. John tells us how:

... Jesus, knowing that his hour had come, to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end. They were at supper... (Jn. 13:1-2).

Jesus did what a servant did to a guest – he washed his friends' feet. Then he explained to them the meaning of what he had done.

'You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you' (Jn. 13:13-15).

He had become a servant for their sakes. They now had to become servants for the sake of the Good News and for the sake of the people whom they were called to serve.

He shared bread and wine with them, telling them to keep up the practice, because whenever they ate and drank



Jesus did what a servant did to a guest – he washed his friends' feet



the bread and wine would
be changed into his body
and blood

bread and wine in that manner they would commemorate his life and death, and truly receive him within them because the bread and wine would be changed into his body and blood. And that extraordinary food would nourish them with the very life of God.

He told them many other things that night – that only by serving and loving him could anyone come to the Father; that he and the Father were one and the same God; that they were his closest friends; that he would do anything for them because he loved them; that he would die and rise again from death; that the Holy Spirit would then come to aid them; that love is greater than death; that we are all obliged to love one another; that peace was his special gift to them. He told them other things too, partly so that they would have faith and confidence when his time of suffering began.

Despite his words and hopes they fled when he was arrested; they peeped around corners when he was being tried and when he carried his cross to the place where he was to die; and they stood a long way off from him when he did die. The whole world knows that day as ‘Good Friday’ – a day of death which is really a day of good news for the world.

The Death & Resurrection of Jesus

Through the prophets of the Old Testament, God taught his people how to live while they waited for freedom. These prophets spoke for God after God called them to speak for him, and the people recognised them as speaking in this way. The things they demanded were not always popular, for they insisted that the people needed faith and a new way of life. They demanded that they should follow God's law, not their own preferences.

Among other things the prophets taught the people to hope for the special Servant of God, 'the Messiah', who would set them free. The Book of Isaiah speaks of the Servant of God who would bring about the salvation of all nations. He would be *a light to the nations* so that God's *salvation may reach to the remotest parts of earth* (Is. 49:6).

God would truly save his people by having his Servant suffer on their behalf. In some striking verses Isaiah described how he would suffer:

Like a sapling he grew up before him, like a root in arid ground. He had no form or charm to attract us, no beauty to win our hearts; he was despised, the lowest of men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, one from whom, as it were, we averted our gaze, despised, for whom we had no regard. Yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing, ours the sorrows he was carrying, while we thought of him as someone being punished and struck with affliction by God; whereas he was being wounded for our rebellions, crushed because of our guilt; the punishment reconciling us fell on him, and we have been healed by his bruises (Is. 53: 2-5).

But Isaiah and the other prophets also assured the people that God's suffering servant would achieve great glory.

Jesus often called himself the 'Son of Man', applying to himself a term which is found in the Book of Daniel. There it is said that at the end of the world there will be a Kingdom of God ruled by the Son of Man who had been given power by God the Father.

When he was arrested, Jesus was questioned by Caiaphas, the High Priest.

'I put you on oath by the living God to tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' 'It is you who say it,' said Jesus, '...from this time onward you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven' (Matt. 26: 63-64).

Caiaphas was enraged. He had deliberately asked Jesus if he was the Son of *the One most venerable* because *the One most venerable* was a Jewish term for God (*see Dn. 7:13-14*). And he knew the Book of Daniel. He knew that Jesus was applying the prophecy to himself. So he charged him with blasphemy and demanded the death penalty.

Jesus patiently underwent unjust trials before Herod and Pilate. He was denied by his friends, mocked, insulted and spat upon, scourged, and crowned with a lacerating crown of thorns. Finally, Pilate sentenced him to die on a cross.



He was nailed there
between two thieves

... he prayed for those who
were killing him

He was nailed there between two thieves and mocked by those who were putting him to death. All his life he had shown himself ready to forgive and love those who repent for their sins. Now he prayed for those who were killing him and promised forgiveness, peace and paradise to one of the thieves who recognised that the man beside him had remarkable power. Even then Jesus was faithful to his task of bringing people out of their sin and into the love and life of the Father.

Jesus Rises from Death

At first those fearful friends of Jesus refused to believe that he had risen. We are told that a group of women, loving friends of Jesus, found the tomb empty and told the apostles so. But, as Luke wrote, *this story of theirs seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them (Lk. 24:11)*. However Peter wanted to believe them, so he ran off to check the matter for himself. It was exactly as he had been told – the tomb was empty; the body of Jesus wasn't there.

Two of the followers of Jesus then claimed to have met a stranger while they were walking from Jerusalem to a nearby village. A little later, while they were having supper with him, they realised that it was no stranger but Jesus himself. By the time they recovered from their shock and confusion he had gone. So they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell their friends – only to learn that Jesus had already appeared to Peter also.

You can imagine their excitement and confusion as they talked about these remarkable events. Then they became even more alarmed because Jesus appeared among them. They thought that they must be seeing a ghost. But he said,

'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts stirring in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is myself. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.' And as he said this he showed them his hands and his feet. Their joy was so great that they still could not believe, as they were dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes (Lk. 24:38-43).

That was the evidence which convinced them. Then he explained to them how the prophets of the Old Testament had foretold his coming as saviour, and how the Jewish scriptures were to be correctly understood:

'So it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this' (Lk. 24: 46-48).

They would finally understand these matters because Jesus and his Father sent the Holy Spirit to teach them their meaning.

Some of his followers were still with him later, still listening to him with great reverence and excitement, when he withdrew from them because it was time for him to be reunited with his Father. Catholics call this event 'the Ascension' of Jesus into Heaven.



At Easter time we celebrate the death and rising of Jesus

At Easter time we celebrate the death and rising of Jesus. They are, as it were, a single event – if Jesus hadn't died he wouldn't have risen from death; if he hadn't risen then his death (and ours) would have no other meaning except finality.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are at the heart of the faith of Christians, the foundation of their lives as believers. Jesus has already overcome sin and death by his own death and resurrection. We are certain that all who live, suffer and die out of love for him will also rise with him to a new and greater life after death. In that way we will never be exiled from the everlasting kingdom which Jesus announced in his earliest teaching.

St Paul has written about this:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ cannot have been raised either, and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith. What is more, we have proved to be false witnesses to God, for testifying against God that he raised Christ to life when he did not raise him – if it is true that the dead are not raised, neither is Christ; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is

pointless and you have not, after all, been released from your sins. In addition, those who have fallen asleep in Christ are utterly lost. If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable. In fact, however, Christ has been raised from the dead, as the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:13-20).

What is the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus for you?



The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

The followers of Jesus had previously thought that the kingdom he spoke of would be a worldly kingdom, like the other ones they knew about. Even at the end, just before his return to his Father, they were still asking him when he would restore Israel to its greatness as a nation, when the new kingdom would begin. In reply we have the very last thing he said to them:

‘... you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end’ (Acts 1:8).



and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them

What we now call Pentecost Sunday commemorates the occasion when the Holy Spirit came with power upon the followers of Jesus. Luke describes the event for us:

When Pentecost day came round, they had all met together, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a violent wind which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them the power to express themselves (Acts 2:1-4).

It seemed so difficult to explain what had happened: ‘suddenly’, ‘sounded like’, ‘seemed like’. But one thing was certain – they changed, they became new people.

They had begun to change when they first saw Jesus risen from the dead. That change was now complete. No longer hesitant, no longer doubting, they saw some parts of the

truth vividly and it came across in the teaching which they began immediately. They were ready to go out to the whole world and tell the Good News. This is even more surprising when we remember that they were still very ordinary people – fishermen, a tax collector, tent makers and the like. They hadn't been trained as teachers. Nothing in their experience seemed to have prepared them to be anything other than shy and backward. Previously they had attended the temple services faithfully and obeyed the Jewish authorities. Yet now they were saying, unanimously and with remarkable confidence, that a carpenter from Galilee who had been killed as a criminal was their Lord and the Lord of the world.

This is how the New Testament writers have described their own religious development. They wrote and taught what their eyes had seen and their ears heard. They did it with courage, conviction and great energy. And the efforts they made, the nature of their later lives and deaths, are compelling evidence that they believed every word they said or wrote.

How the Good News Was Received

Thousands listened to the first preachers of the Good News. As time went by many more thousands listened to them and to those who became their successors. And of those listeners, many were so convinced by what they heard that they were received as Christians. They, too, became followers of Jesus.

The first followers of Jesus – and many of those who succeeded them – were willing to give up everything, to undergo remarkable hardships, to suffer and die, rather than abandon the task they had been given of being his witnesses. Many of them were tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus their Lord.



gentle and utterly human

Two thousand years ago people listened open-mouthed to what those first Christians said. Their message is equally compelling today. People who really want to find truth, meaning, love and dignity in their lives and in their society still find it so.

Like Us – But Not Like Us

Then or now – if people had been asked how God might come to earth they would never have imagined that he would come as he did, humble, gentle and utterly human.

We see him present with his friends at the marriage feast at Cana. We discover him tired, sitting by Jacob's well and asking for a drink of water. He weeps at the tomb of Lazarus. He is always aware of people, treating them with respect, caring about their troubles. He raises to life the young daughter of Jairus, and, while everyone stands astounded, he asks them to give her something to eat. Even when he was very busy he finds time to welcome a group of little children.

At the same time he is extraordinary. He emphasises again and again his special relationship with God, his Father:

'Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27).

Even his friends can't understand the meaning of everything he says. He sees and describes things quite differently from the way we would. He attacks some classes of 'respectable' people, yet he praises pagans, sees good in those whom the people of his time regarded as sinners, he drew close to lepers and to the despised people of Samaria. Why did he seek out the company of those who were downtrodden by society? The answer is plain – they needed love, healing and forgiveness. Yet even though he defended

many defenceless people he didn't defend himself during his trial. He never used his power for his own benefit.

Other religious teachers spoke about God as someone they had heard of: he spoke about God as someone he knew intimately. Whatever he said was powerful and compelling – as were the miracles he did. With absolute conviction and certainty he forgave sinners – something which would have been absurd for anyone else to do, yet which seemed absolutely right when he did it. When he spoke about his resurrection, his rising from death, he spoke with the same certainty.

The things he did were fully human. Yet many of his actions were more than human.

The Test of Love and Mercy

Jesus placed such importance upon love and mercy that he said we will be judged according to how loving and merciful we are. At the end, when it is time to give an account of our lives, Jesus may say to us –

'... Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome, lacking clothes and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me' (Matt. 25:34-36).



in prison and you
came to see me

If we show surprise and ask, 'But when did we do these things?' he will say,

'In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40).

He also said that those who are unloving and unmerciful will be shut out forever from God's love and mercy – that isn't a risk many people would care to take.

The Gospel Invitation

The four writers of the Gospel didn't set out to provide a life of Jesus in the way a modern biographer would. They didn't research all his activities and write a well-rounded book about him – one which gave a lot of personal information. They didn't try to find out what his favourite colour was, and they didn't analyse his personality. They merely tried to recall what he did and said and how these things affected the people he came in contact with. They hoped that if they told this remarkable story accurately others, like us, would also want to become his followers.



he invited some people
to become his disciples.
Now he invites us

Jesus invited them to become his followers. In return, they accepted him as their Lord, the one who spoke with authority, the one to whom they would dedicate their lives, the one they would follow faithfully to the end. That is why every page of the Gospel invites readers to become followers of Jesus also, and members of the community of believers. When Jesus walked the earth he invited some people to become his disciples. Now he invites us.

During the centuries this invitation has been read and accepted by millions. People who longed to know the truth have discovered it in the Gospel and, as a result, have accepted Jesus as their Lord. That invitation is offered to you today.

The Lord is Present

One of the great messages of Christianity is that these extraordinary events didn't merely happen in past times – they are happening now. In past times God extended an invitation to a people to become his people – he now extends the same invitation. Jesus healed people in the past and he heals people today. The Holy Spirit once inspired people to go out and proclaim the teaching of Jesus with confidence and hope – the Holy Spirit aids and inspires people today.

Christians believe that Jesus is still present in their lives in the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. That knowledge may stimulate you to pray every day to the Lord Jesus so that you too may receive his love and mercy.

Do you feel you are being invited to become a disciple of Jesus and join the community of believers?



The New Zealand poet James K. Baxter once wrote a prayer of praise which he entitled 'Song to the Lord Jesus':

*Lord Jesus, you are like the sun in the sky,
The light shining in our darkness
So that we ourselves can become the light.*

*Lord Jesus, you died in pain on the cross.
You rose again from the dead.
Now you live within us,
You live our lives and die our deaths with us.*

*Lord Jesus, all that is in heaven belongs to you,
All things that are on earth.
Send your Spirit like a river of clear water
Flowing through our hearts.*

*Lord Jesus, you are the house and we are the timber,
You are the vine and we are the branches.
Send your Spirit so that the vine may flower,
Heal in us whatever is at fault.*

You may wish to make your own prayer or to think about the following words of Jesus which he spoke once to a group of his followers and which he says right now to those who believe in him:

'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear, and never heard it' (Lk. 10:23-24).

Did you know?



Jesus Christ

Jesus is 'the Christ' (XP in Greek).
Jesus is Alpha (A) and Omega (Ω).
Alpha and Omega are the first and
last letters in the Greek alphabet.
(See Rev. 1:8, 22:13).

Nihil obstat
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- 1 Life of Faith
- 2 God Speaks to Us
- 3 Jesus Christ
- 4 The Catholic Church
- 5 God's Life in Us
- 6 The Mass
- 7 Sacraments of Healing
- 8 Marriage
- 9 Life of a Christian
- 10 Life Forever



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