

JESUS: HIS LIFE AND WORK

By

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus is an absolutely unique figure well worthy of our earnest study. He never held office, he never wrote a book and he never had a family or owned a house – yet he had more influence on the world than anyone who ever lived. He was not only a great moral and ethical teacher, but he was and is our Lord and Saviour. He was uniquely the God-man, 100% God and 100% man, his incarnation, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection are a message in themselves. Let's see what we can learn about him.

In this talk today I'm going to start by looking in outline at what we can know about Jesus as an historical figure from both Christian and non-Christian sources. Having done that I'm going to cover what we can know about his life and his work in broad detail. Finally I'm going to look at the meaning of what we've learnt.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Non-Christian Sources

A number of Extra Biblical sources contain references to Jesus. The most important of these are:

Pliny the Younger (governor of Bithynia in AD 112) makes reference to Christians worshipping Christ as God in his Epistles

Cornelius Tacitus (c AD 55-120) wrote a history of the Roman Empire covering the years 14-68 AD. Unfortunately the books covering the period 29-32 AD are lost. However, in his coverage of the burning of Rome under Nero he says "Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate ..." Actually it's surprising that he devotes so much coverage to Jesus, a figure from a minor province, in this volume. That probably indicates that Christian influence was powerful and widespread by this time.

Mara bar Serapion wrote a letter to his son from prison a little after 70 AD in which he refers to the martyrdom of Christ.

Julius Africanus (c AD 160-240) in his Chronology refers to the time of Jesus' crucifixion and also refers to the darkness which fell on the land at that time, admittedly rather disparagingly. He also quotes another writer Phlegon (whose work has now been lost) and states that Phlegon also confirms darkness coming over the land at the time of the crucifixion.

Josephus the Jewish historian (c AD 37-100) refers to Jesus several times in his *The Antiquities of the Jewish People*. In his best known quote he writes:

"About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many of the Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first

place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him.* And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”

The oldest manuscripts of Josephus’ writings contain this quote, but its complete authenticity is greatly disputed because Josephus was not a Christian and in other places he refers to “Jesus who was called the Christ”. However, it is certain that the quote without the words marked in italics (which might have been added later) is original and valid.

The collection of Jewish traditions known as the Talmud also contains references to Jesus. The most famous is in Sanhedrin 43a which states that “On the eve of the Passover Yesh was hanged.” This passage also says that he was hanged because he “ practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.”

In conclusion we can say from these non-Christian sources that:

1. Jesus was truly an historical person
2. Jesus lived in Palestine during the first century AD.
3. The Jewish leadership of the time was involved in the death of Jesus.
4. Jesus was crucified by the Romans under the leadership of Pontius Pilate.
5. Jesus’ ministry was associated with wonders or sorcery – which we call miracles.

Christian Sources

We shouldn’t ignore Christian sources, even though many atheists claim that we should. Historians don’t ignore Christian sources of evidence. They take them into account, attempting to allow for any possible bias, so we have to take this evidence seriously.

Non-Biblical Sources

There are a number of non-Biblical Christian sources, such as:

Clement of Rome, bishop of Rome towards the end of the first century AD. He makes it clear that the Apostles received their Gospel material from the Lord Jesus.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, who was a disciple of Peter, Paul and John, wrote a number of letters whilst on his way to execution in Rome in around AD 108. He says:

“Jesus Christ who was of the race of David, who was the son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and on earth and those under the earth; who moreover was truly raised from the dead, his Father having raised him

Quadratus, a disciple of the Apostles and the bishop of Athens, writing around AD 125, wrote:

“The deeds of our saviour were always before you, for they were true miracles; those that were healed, those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when healed and when raised, but were always present. They remained living a long time, not only whilst our Lord was on the earth, but likewise when he had left the earth. So that some of them have also lived to our own times.”

Justin Martyr (c AD 100 –167) wrote many confirmations of the facts attested by the Gospels, such as:

“Now there is a village in the land of the Jews In which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judea.”

There are also numbers of others, but I’ve just quoted the most important for you here.

In conclusion we can say that these non-Biblical Christian sources confirm the five propositions we derived from non-Christian sources and also confirm the true nature of Jesus’ miracles and the resurrection of Jesus. I ask you, is it likely that all those Christian martyrs would have gone to their deaths unless they were completely convinced of the evidence for the events for which they were facing a death which could have been avoided simply by renouncing their beliefs.

All this is supremely important because our whole Christian faith depends on the truth of the facts that Jesus was truly an historical figure who was born onto this earth, who was crucified, died and was raised from the dead – all on particular days in history around 2,000 years ago. Unlike the other major religions Christianity is based on the truth of these historical facts.

Biblical Sources

Of course, we haven’t learnt much about the detail of Jesus’ life yet. For that, we need to turn to Biblical material, principally the Gospels. Let’s start by taking a brief look at how the Gospels were written.

As I’m sure you all know there are three quite similar Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke usually called the synoptic Gospels and one rather different account, the Gospel of John.

The term ‘synoptic’ really means ‘at one look’ and these Gospels are so called because they each tell a similar story differing only as to some additions and emphases according to the special interests of each of the authors and the message they were trying to convey. The Gospel of John is classified separately because its style and emphasis are so different and it was probably written later than the synoptic Gospels.

Here, we must remember that the Synoptic Gospels were written over a 10-15 year period by three individuals at least one of whom – Matthew – was with Jesus throughout his ministry, and that they were written for different recipients and for different purposes.

The first Gospel to be written, I believe between 50 AD and 58 AD, was probably the Gospel of Mark. This was most likely written by John Mark, a close associate of and interpreter for the apostle Peter who also accompanied Paul and Barnabus to Antioch. He also must have spent time with Jesus if he was the young man who fled naked from Gethsemane. So this gospel was written by a man who certainly had had close contact with eyewitnesses of the events described and may have been an eyewitness himself.

The second Gospel to be written, I believe in 60-63 AD, was probably the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a well-educated gentile physician who was with Paul. Luke says that he carefully

investigated the matters of which he writes and he was certainly a careful and diligent historian.

The last synoptic Gospel to be written, probably between 60 and 68 AD, was the Gospel of Matthew. The author is believed to be Matthew (who was called Levi by Luke and Mark), one of the twelve apostles who was with Jesus throughout his ministry.

The synoptic gospels contain much similar material, but they also contain material unique to themselves.

The Gospel of John was written somewhat later as both the Christian church and Christian theology were developing. It is generally believed that the author of this Gospel was the apostle John, who was with Jesus as his disciple, probably writing around AD 85.

John's Gospel is full of symbolism and multiple layers of meaning and its theology is much more developed than that of the synoptics. Nevertheless, I believe we can accept the historic incidents and accounts in this Gospel as the fully factual renditions of an apostolic eyewitness. Consequently, in going on to draw out from all this material a picture of the life of Jesus, I'm going to be using material from all the Gospels and indeed other books of the NT, especially the writings of Paul, which are actually the earliest NT accounts we have.

Chronology of the Life of Jesus and some Detail of His Early Life

Let's start off by looking at what we can deduce about when Jesus was born, lived and conducted his ministry. That's not as easy as it might appear at first sight because the Gospel writers were not really interested in 'when' questions and their narratives are mostly not arranged in date order.

For example, in the Gospel of Mark the first part deals with events that took place in and around Galilee (Mark 1 – 9) followed by events that took place in Judea (Mark 10 – 16). So any event in Galilee will be in the early chapters and any event in Judea in the later chapters. We're pretty sure that things weren't like that because in the Gospel of John, Jesus moves back and forth between Galilee and Judea – which seems more probable. He would have attended the major Feasts such as the Passover in Jerusalem each year. Matthew follows Mark and keeps this geographic framework, but alternates his account between events and sayings. Luke on the other hand places most of Jesus' teachings in just two sections of the Gospel.

Acknowledging these difficulties let's start by looking at the likely date of Jesus' birth. Well as we'll see in a moment it certainly wasn't the year zero. The man who first calculated the year of Jesus' birth, a sixth century monk called Dionysius Exiguus got his calculations wrong. In fact he didn't even call this the year 0, he called the year of Jesus' birth 1 AD and didn't have a year zero (possibly because the symbol for zero in mathematics hadn't yet been introduced into Europe).

So how can we know the correct date? For reasons of time I'm not going to detail all the evidence this morning – those interested can read the fuller notes on my website – but we can say that Jesus was almost certainly born between the end of 7 BC and very early in 4 BC.

We're absolutely sure that he wasn't born after the beginning of 4 BC because we know that Jesus was born to Mary "in the time of King Herod" (Matthew 2:1; compare Luke 1:5). Herod commenced his reign in 37 BC and according to Josephus died in the 34th year of his reign. Josephus was counting in the Roman calendar and translated that means Herod died in 4 BC. Josephus says that an eclipse of the moon took place before Herod died - and we know that took place on 12-13 March 4 BC. Josephus also says the Passover that year (April 11th) occurred after Herod's death, so we can date Herod's death as between 12th March and 11th April 4 BC.

According to Luke, Jesus was born in the days of Caesar Augustus (who reigned from 44 BC to AD 14) when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:2). We know that Quirinius was governor in 6-7 AD, but that's much too late. He was probably governor of Syria on two occasions, however, and the first occasion couldn't have been before the end of 7 BC because he was fighting in Macedonia until then.

We can't identify real astronomical events with the famous star which guided the wise men with any degree of certainty and anyway this may have been a supernatural phenomenon – although Chinese records do mention a comet or supernova in 4 or 5 BC and there was a bright triple conjunction of planets in 7 BC.

Following Jesus' birth, we know little of the chronology or indeed the content of his early life.

Let's now turn to the chronology of the years of Jesus' public ministry. The Gospels have little chronology for the beginning of this, but we know that the first important event of that ministry was the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and fortunately Luke does have some reference to this (Luke 3:1-2).

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar— when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

Except for the "fifteenth year" statement, the other references cover too great a time span to be useful. Unfortunately even that statement is not as precise as it seems at first sight, because it could refer either to the time after Caesar Augustus' death in AD 14 or to the time after Tiberius became co-emperor with him in AD 11/12 and we don't know what calendar Luke was using, Jewish or Roman. Without giving you the lengthy analysis of the possibilities, we can say that in summary the statement seems to point to either the years AD 25/26 or AD 28/29 – I tend to favour AD 28/29. Of course, this reference is to the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry and it is likely that some time passed between this and the start of Jesus' ministry.

The only other useful Gospel reference is John 2:20

"The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"

Thus it would seem that the temple rebuilding programme was in its forty sixth year in the early part of Jesus' ministry, which would have been around AD 28, although we don't have a completely definitive date for the start of the Temple rebuilding programme.

Taking all the evidence into account it seems likely that Jesus' ministry began in AD 29.

On the face of it, the synoptic Gospels seem to indicate that Jesus' ministry lasted little more than a year, because no annual event such as the Passover festival is mentioned twice. Difficulty in using this material is compounded by the fact that these writers did not arrange their material in chronological order, as we mentioned earlier. However, that does not mean that Jesus' ministry did not encompass more than one Passover. When we turn to the Gospel of John we find events apparently arranged in a more chronological order. We also find references to certainly three Passovers (John 2:13, 23; John 6:4 and John 11:55) and possibly four if John 5:1 (which refers to "a Feast of the Jews") is a reference to the Passover. This terminology is usually used in reference to Passover, and thus I think the best conclusion is that Jesus ministered through four Passovers or about three to four years in total.

A final question, which bears on the length of Jesus' ministry, is the date of his death and resurrection. The last possible date for this would be the end of Pontius Pilate's rule in Judea in AD 36/37. A second piece of evidence confirming this as the last possible date is the fact that Caiaphas who presided over Jesus' trial (Matthew 26:57) was deposed as high priest in AD 37. As we shall see later I believe that Jesus died on 14th Nisan and that this day was a Friday. Thus we have to look at astronomical tables to determine in what years the 14th of Nisan (which is determined by the rotation of the moon around the earth) fell on a Friday. We find that the years AD 27, 30, 33 and 36 satisfy this criterion. However, 27 is too early and 36 is too late, leaving us with only AD 30 and 33 as real possibilities. I prefer AD 33 (against the majority of scholars who opt for AD 30) for three reasons. Firstly, this date leaves plenty of time for a three or four years of ministry, whereas this is difficult to reconcile with AD 30 if Jesus' only commenced ministry in AD 28 or 29. Secondly, the AD 33 date fits the dating of the prophecy set out concerning the Anointed One in Daniel 9:25. Thirdly, Sejanus' attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius was thwarted in AD 31. After this coup Tiberius purged most of the persons in high office who had been appointed by Sejanus over the following two years. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time. This possibly explains why the Jewish mob was able to intimidate the ruthless, anti-Semitic Pilate into killing Jesus with the threat "If you release this man you are no friend of Caesar!" (John 19:12).

In summary then we can now set out a chronology of the main events in the life of Jesus:

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|----------|---|
| 7/5 BC | Birth of Jesus – I favour early 6 BC |
| AD 28/29 | Jesus commences his public ministry – I favour AD 29 |
| AD 33 | Arrest, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (AD 30 doesn't really give time for the three or four years of Jesus' ministry) |

THE LIFE AND WORK OF JESUS

The Birth of Jesus

Throughout its history the Christian church has maintained that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit [and] born of the Virgin Mary." (Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38, 45-46; 2:1-7). Unless one is determined to eliminate the supernatural element from the historic basis of Christianity – which I certainly am not because I believe that a God mighty enough to create

this whole universe can very easily intervene within it – I see no good reason for rejecting the clear accounts in Matthew and Luke.

Christ's virgin birth is not an idea that originated in Greek mythology. Greek figures such as Hercules or Perseus, who were said to be conceived by the gods, owe their origins to a sexual encounter between a god and a human woman. Thus these Greek mythological examples are not actually virgin births and are nothing like the Christian account of the conception of Christ. In any event, the Gospel accounts are not at all Greek, but very Jewish in nature. The passages in Luke are probably the most Jewish part of his entire Gospel.

Certainly there was no need for the idea of a miraculous conception of the Messiah amongst Jewish Christians. In Jewish thinking the Messiah would be the offspring of the Davidic line through normal physical conception. Greek Christians influenced by Platonic or Gnostic ideas might have felt that this protected Christ against 'physical contamination', but as we have already said the Gospel accounts are very Jewish and bear no sign of any Greek influence. Some Christians (many influenced either by Platonic views or a negative view of human sexuality) have held that the virginal conception was necessary to keep the Son of God from inheriting the corruption and sin of Adam. There could be something to this view – provided one adheres to the doctrine of the immaculate conception to prevent Jesus inheriting sin via Mary (which in any event I don't believe) – but I don't accept this idea. A better argument is that the virgin birth following conception by the Holy Spirit makes it clear that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. In any event, I think we should be careful not to seek to limit the ways in which God may accomplish his plans, whilst at the same time accepting the accuracy of the Biblical accounts.

Scripture sets the location of Jesus' birth as Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7) and we are told that Mary and Joseph had gone there because their presence was required at a census (Luke 2:1). Some scholars have doubted the accuracy of Luke's account because he apparently refers to a universal census in the Roman world when he says "all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). We know that during the reign of Caesar Augustus no universal census was conducted throughout the Roman world on a single occasion. However, Augustus did organise numerous different censuses in a systematic way so that the whole empire was eventually covered. Thus, Luke's reference should not be seen as erroneous, but rather as referring to one aspect of this larger census programme. Scholars have also objected that such censuses did not require travelling to one's birthplace or the bringing of one's wife. This latter issue is irrelevant, because Mary may have merely wanted to be with her husband at the time of giving birth – which would have been natural. As to the first objection, we do know that some Roman censuses did require the father of a family (and indeed other family members owning shares of family property) to register in their ancestral home. This was because property owners were required to deliver tax declarations in the city in which they owned property or had residual or contingent shares in property – the complexities of Jewish Law in this area meant that rights of possession and ownership were often very difficult to untangle¹.

Luke tells us that Jesus' birth took place in a manger (or a place with a feeding trough for animals) because there was insufficient space for them at the local caravanserai or possibly guest room (translated inn in modern bibles, although inns in the modern sense were largely unknown then). As a result, Jesus was placed in an animals feeding trough – a good example of the way in which God turns the values of the world upside down. We should also note that

¹ Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, New York: Knopf 1960 at pp30-31

Jesus' birth was announced to Shepherds, who were regarded as disreputable and dishonest (Sanhedrin 25b) and unclean under the Law. This shows that Jesus was for the poor, sinners and outcasts.

It's interesting that Jesus' birthplace, Bethlehem, was a major source of sacrificial lambs for the Temple in Jerusalem. This gives us an interesting parallel of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God. The traditional site of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is a cave located today in the Church of the Nativity. We cannot be sure that this is the real site, although it was established in early church tradition and a church was built to mark it as early as AD 325. Jerome asserted that the site had been honoured by Christians since AD 135. A further parallel to the theme of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb is shown by the stronghold of Migdal Eder (mentioned in Genesis 35) just outside Bethlehem. Apparently, shepherds nurtured sheep raised for Temple sacrifice in Migdal Eder, especially during the colder months when they might even wrap them in cloths or swaddling clothes to preserve them from infection and subsequent disqualification as perfect sacrificial lambs. We know that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes, probably made from Mary's grave clothes, which all Jewish women carried with them on journeys during these times in case they died en route, so what a wonderful parallel we have here between Jesus the sacrificial lamb of God and the sacrificial Temple lambs. Incidentally, careful examination of the Jewish traditions makes it clear that we cannot rule out Jesus' birth having been during the winter months on account of the flocks being out on the hills at the time (Luke 2:8) – as many have argued – because the Mishnah tells of flocks being out on the hills in February, one of the coldest months. Although Jesus' birth is very unlikely to have been on December 25th.

Yet a further parallel of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb is given by the fact that Jesus' birth was first announced to shepherds (Luke 2:9-14). Very likely these would have been shepherds tending the flocks around Migdal Eder and concerned with the raising of sacrificial lambs for the Temple. Who could be more appropriate to be called to attend on Jesus – the sacrificial lamb of God.

We know that Jesus was circumcised according to the prevailing Jewish custom on the eighth day after his birth (Luke 2:21) as was John the Baptist (Luke 1:59). This might have been done in Bethlehem, but we just don't know. Circumcision was one of the few things which could lawfully be done on the Sabbath and it was usually rounded off by a festive meal. Circumcision meant that the recipient was assuming the obligations of the Law and was open to participate in the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant. It was customary for the parents to name the child at this time, and in accordance with the command given to Mary and Joseph by the angel, they named him Jesus. He had been born a saviour (Luke 2:11) and was now given the name that designated him as the One who fulfilled that role (Matthew 1:21). As Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, this in effect made Jesus an adopted child of Joseph and fully established him in the Davidic line.

As a perpetual reminder that all men are born in sin, a mother was ceremonially defiled by the birth of a child. In the case of bearing a son the mother was defiled for seven days until his circumcision, she then continued to be ceremonially unclean for a further 33 days. Only blood could remove the uncleanness and so a burnt offering and a sin offering were required to render the mother ceremonially clean. Furthermore the family were required to redeem their firstborn son for the equivalent of five shekels of silver in accordance with the rule laid down in Numbers 18:15-16. This is what Luke is referring to in Luke 2:22 when he says:

“ When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord”. Actually attendance at Jerusalem was not compulsory for this ceremony; redemption could be made from any priest. Purification did require attendance at the Temple in Jerusalem, but under the law this could be done later when the mother attended a feast. Nevertheless, it seems Joseph and Mary troubled to take this special child to Jerusalem and completed Mary’s purification at the same time.

The normal offering on such an occasion was a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a dove for a sin offering, but the poor and those of modest means were allowed to offer two doves or two pigeons instead. This is what Mary and Joseph offered (Luke 2:24), so we can conclude that they were poor or at least of modest means at this time, presumably because the wise men had not yet visited them with their costly gifts.

The redemption ceremony consisted of the presentation of the child to the priest (in recognition of God’s ownership of him) and second in the payment of five shekels. The priest then pronounced two blessings, one in thanksgiving for the gift of the firstborn son and the second in thanksgiving for the law of redemption. It would appear that this ceremony was performed by Simeon (Luke 2:25-27), a righteous man who may have been the son of the famous Rabbi Hillel who succeeded his father as president of the Sanhedrin. Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:27) to make a prophetic proclamation concerning Jesus that he would be God’s salvation (Luke 2:30) and that he would be a light of revelation to the gentiles and a glory to Israel (Luke 2:32). Simeon also prophesied that Jesus would cause “the falling and rising of many in Israel” and would also be a sword that would pierce Mary’s soul.

The accounts in Luke and Matthew can only be reconciled by assuming that Mary and Joseph returned to Bethlehem after the presentation of Jesus in Jerusalem. Perhaps Joseph had found work there. Certainly Matthew tells us that the Magi or wise men visited Jesus in Bethlehem up to two years after his birth (Matthew 2:7-11; 16) and clearly some time after his presentation in Jerusalem. We are told they visited Jesus in a house (Matthew 2:11). Popular tradition has it that there were three Magi, but we don’t actually know. The Magi presented Jesus with costly offerings of gold, frankincense (an aromatic resin obtained from Boswellia trees) and myrrh (a red brown resinous material used in healing ointments and also for embalming and worth more than its weight in gold) (Matthew 2:11).

Immediately after the visit of the wise men Joseph was told to flee to Egypt, because Herod was going to kill Jesus (Matthew 2:13), and they remained there until after the death of Herod in 4 BC. After Herod’s death Mary, Joseph and Jesus returned to Israel, settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2:21-23). That means that Jesus may have remained in Egypt for around a year or 18 months. It appears that Joseph had originally intended to return to Bethlehem, but on learning that a son of Herod, Archelaus, was ruling that part of Israel he decided to settle in a different region (Matthew 2:22).

The birth of John the Baptist (who was a relative of Jesus – Luke 1:36) is integral with the birth of Jesus. John was born to an elderly couple long past the age of childbearing, Zechariah a devout elderly priest and his wife Elizabeth. John was to play a special role in God’s salvation plan as the forerunner and herald of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus' Early Life – The Silent Years

Until the commencement of Jesus' years of public ministry, we only know of one or two fragmentary events in his life. This time is often called the silent years. I think that there may have been a deliberate suppression of detail by the gospel writers in order that we might focus on the central facts of Jesus and his mission.

It would appear that Jesus grew up in a good if modest home. Joseph's work as a carpenter (Matthew 13:55) would have supported at least a lower middle class level of existence. However, he seems not to have lived long (Mark 3:31-35; 6:3). The reference to Jesus as the "son of Mary" in Mark 6:3 would be impossible to imagine if Joseph were still alive at this time as a man was always referred to as the son of his father in Jewish custom (usually even after his father was dead). It appears that sometime between the visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Joseph died. Apart from this we know almost nothing of his childhood apart from the account of his discourse with the Rabbis and teachers of the Law in Jerusalem (Luke 2:42-49) at the age of twelve.

Joseph's death would have left a considerable family to the care of Jesus as the eldest son. We know that there were four half brothers younger than Jesus; James, Joseph, Judas and Simeon and at least two half sisters (Mark 6:3). The brothers did not become disciples of Jesus prior to his crucifixion, but only after his resurrection. We know two of them better through the epistles of James and Jude. His brothers did not seem at all sympathetic towards his ministry before the resurrection. On one occasion, they apparently persuaded his mother to come and take him home and on another, they accused him of being a "secret Messiah" because he did not work in Jerusalem. No doubt that is part of the reason why Jesus said, "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour." (Matthew 13:57).

The NT actually mentions the brothers and sisters of Jesus on numerous occasions (Mark 3:31-35; 6:3; John 2:12; 7:3-5, 10; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19), although apart from the naming in Mark 6:3 already noted the other references are anonymous, apart from the naming of James in Galatians. Some scholars have argued that these were not really brothers of Jesus but only cousins or close relatives – no doubt in a misguided attempt to preserve the purity of Mary – but this does not really accord well with the way Matthew and Mark refer to them and Greek has a distinct word for cousins which is not used. It also does not fit well with the words of Matthew 1:24-25 "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. However, he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." The only support I can find for the view that they were not true half brothers, is that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother to the disciple John, rather than his brothers, at the crucifixion.

Of the early years of Jesus' life, Luke simply says that Jesus "... grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40).

The only other event from Jesus' early life that is recorded in scripture is a visit by Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2:41-52). It was apparently the custom of his parents to do this each year (Luke 2:41), but it would have been completely in accordance with Jewish customs for Jesus not to attend until he reached the age of thirteen and became a "Son of the Law", a full member of the synagogue. After that, he would be expected to attend those festivals for which attendance

was prescribed by the Law – the feasts of the Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles – although many Jews scattered far and wide throughout the Roman Empire only made a real effort to attend the Passover. However, Jewish tradition did provide for sons to be taken to important observances a year or two before they reached thirteen, in order that they might be prepared, which is no doubt what was happening here.

We don't know exactly how long the family stayed in Jerusalem, although Luke does note that after the feast was over Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem (Luke 2:43) – which seems to imply that they had stayed for the full seven days of the feast of unleavened bread (for which attendance was customary but not compulsory) after the Passover. His parents apparently did not discover this until they stopped to rest after the first days travel. When travelling to and from feasts, men and women usually travelled separately, the women going ahead, so perhaps we can infer that each parent thought that Jesus was with the other. Joseph and Mary then spent the night and travelled back to Jerusalem, where they spent yet a further day searching for Jesus. Luke tells us that after three days they found him in the temple courts (Luke 2:46) “sitting amongst the teachers [of the Law]”. It was a normal Jewish custom for the Midrash or Academy of Jerusalem to establish public question and answer sessions at the time of feasts or the Sabbath.

What was not normal was that Jesus' questions should show such insight as to attract the special attention and surprise of the teachers and that he should manifest skill in answering questions put to him (Luke 2:46-47). Apparently by this time, he had somehow acquired a good education – clearly better than the basic education in the Torah which would normally have been provided to Jewish children by the Synagogue – although there was a Jewish tradition that the Messiah would have a direct knowledge of God. This was obviously continued, as the adult Jesus clearly knew Hebrew (which was a dead language in popular circles by this time and only used by certain sects and academics) since some of his later scriptural quotations refer to the original Hebrew scripture rather than the LXX. It is likely that he spoke Greek also – otherwise he would not have been able to communicate with the non-Jews, with whom he is reported as conversing.

His parents surprise at his learning and interest in the Temple (Luke 2:48-49) indicates that, after the miraculous events surrounding his birth, the intervening years had probably been relatively normal – so much so that the uniqueness of Jesus and his divine calling had faded from their memory. Indeed the fact that this is the only incident from Jesus' childhood recorded in the canonical Gospels suggests that no other incidents during this period were particularly significant. Certainly, the Gospel writers were unaware of any other miraculous acts or events during this time. After Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, John explicitly states “ [t]his, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.” (John 2:11). The final factor which argues for the normalcy of these ‘silent years’ is the unbelief of Jesus' family and community which we have already mentioned.

Of the twenty years or so which passed between the event in Jerusalem and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry we can know little or nothing. During the early part of his adult life Jesus followed in his Father's footsteps working as a carpenter in Nazareth (Mark 6:3). The one important truth we can learn is that even at the age of twelve Jesus was apparently already conscious of his unique relationship with God and at least something of his calling.

The Ministry of John the Baptist

Sometime between AD 26 and AD 29, probably in AD 28 or 29, a strangely dressed man appeared near the southern end of the Jordan River. We know that he was ascetic in his diet and lifestyle (Matthew 11:18; Mark 1:6) and that his appearance caused great excitement amongst the Jewish people. This was partly due to his dress:

“ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” (Mark 1:6)

which was very similar to that of the prophet Elijah:

"[Elijah] was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt round his waist." (2 Kings 1:8).

This similarity of John’s dress prompted the people to ask whether John could be Elijah, since it had been prophesied that the prophet would return (Malachi 4:5). Although when asked if he was Elijah, John naturally had to deny it (John 1:21). The excitement was also due to John’s preaching, since he spoke a powerful message of repentance and judgement reminiscent of the OT prophets:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Matthew 3:7-8)

This was a strong statement, for a Jew nothing was more unclean and repulsive than a viper. John accompanied his preaching with a ceremonial baptism of repentance in the River Jordan (Matthew 3:5-6). The power of the impression he made was further enhanced by the fact that it was believed that the prophetic voice had been silent in Israel for almost 400 years and that the people were alone with God and his law (2 Baruch 85:1-3). It was also believed that the work of the Holy Spirit had ceased (1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). With the coming of John, the voice of prophecy was once again heard in Israel.

John was known as “the Baptist” because of his ministry of baptism. The Jews did previously have a rite of baptism (as opposed to ceremonial washing which was a common Jewish practice) in the rite of proselyte baptism – a part of the ceremony of conversion of Gentiles to Judaism. However, John’s baptism differed in that his baptism was primarily, if not exclusively, for Jews:

“And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” (Luke 3:8)

John clearly rejected the idea that one could enter the coming messianic kingdom simply on the basis of ancestry. Race was not sufficient, only the repentant of Israel would enter the kingdom.

It is interesting to note that John was baptising less than ten miles from the Qumran community (of Dead Sea Scrolls fame), because his preaching had striking similarities to their teaching. They both stressed the need for repentance, were ascetic in their lifestyle and lived in the wilderness. Even more strikingly, they both based their ministry on the words of Isaiah 40:3:

“A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3)

Thus, it may well be that John was originally a member of the Qumran community, but we cannot know for certain.

However, his message was not simply one of judgement. Along with his pronouncement of judgement came an announcement of the arrival of the messianic kingdom:

"After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7-8)

John saw himself as the forerunner of the Messiah and sought to prepare the people for him: "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (John 1:23).

For the Jews the desert (or 'wilderness' in some translations) is not just a harsh and lonely place, but is associated with revelation and God's care and providence. Consequently, the blessings of the coming messianic age were frequently seen as a returning to the wilderness – see (Isaiah 40:3; 48:20-22; Hosea 2:14-15; 12:9). We don't know if such thinking influenced John the Baptist, but what we do know is that he preached and baptised to prepare the way for the one who was to come. Thus, in accordance with Isaiah 40:3, he preached in the desert or wilderness.

John baptised a repentant people. The baptism was not merely an individual experience, but a corporate ceremony that involved becoming part of a community awaiting the coming of the Messiah. John told that whereas he baptised with a baptism of repentance the coming Messiah would baptise with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

The Jews expected that the Messiah would both judge the wicked and deliver the righteous. The reference to fire in John's message can thus best be seen as a judgement on the unrighteous - see (Matthew 3:12). Most Jews believed that the messianic judgement would involve the destruction of their enemies and the restoration of Israel to greatness. For them, his coming would involve retribution and redemption, damnation and deliverance, judgement and justice. However, Jesus had other ideas, he did not believe that his ministry would bring immediate judgement on the nations, nor would Israel be restored to her former greatness. He believed that judgement on the world would certainly come, but not at the present time, and that this judgement would involve not just the Gentiles but Israel as well (Matthew 25:31-46). He also believed that a more immediate judgement faced Israel (Mark 12:1-12; Luke 11:45-52; 19:41-44).

The Baptism of Jesus

At the height of John's career, a candidate came forward for baptism who was different from all the rest – Jesus. It's difficult to comprehend why Jesus had to be baptised by John. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for sin, but the sinless Jesus had no need of repentance. We are told that John himself was reluctant to carry out this baptism, but was persuaded by Jesus that it was right to do so:

"But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented." (Matthew 3:14-15)

Exactly what Jesus meant by fulfilling all righteousness is not clear. Probably it meant following in the path God had revealed to Jesus as his will for Jesus' life. Possibly, Jesus was baptised to show that he was acceptable to God and consecrated in his service, rather as a priest was washed with water to consecrate him to office (Leviticus 16:4). Additionally the baptism may have been to identify Jesus with sinners so that they might be identified with him when he gave himself on the cross as a substitute for them. Certainly, the baptism was so that Jesus should be anointed with the Holy Spirit in order that he might fulfil his messianic role.

Whatever the exact purpose, this was a unique baptism. Even though all who accept Jesus as Lord are commanded to be baptised (Matthew 28:19), there is no suggestion whatsoever in scripture that in doing this we are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

John's baptism of repentance involved a radical break with the past. So too for Jesus his baptism involved a radical break with the past and identification with the kingdom community and an assumption of his messianic role. The 'silent years' had come to an end.

Whether Jesus knew at this time that his task involved the cross is uncertain, but it is certain that here he submitted completely to the will of the Father, even if this involved death – he well knew what had happened to the OT prophets.

The Gospel accounts associate three unusual events with Jesus' baptism. Firstly, the heavens were torn apart (Mark 1:10) – this may have been just a theological reality or both a physical and a spiritual reality. Secondly, we read of the Holy Spirit 'descending like a dove' on Jesus (Mark 1:10). Thirdly, a voice from heaven was heard "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11).

The second event emphasises Jesus' messianic role as the man for whom John had been preparing the way, since John expected this person to bring a baptism in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). The significance of this for Jesus is apparent as we look at the words of his first sermon in Nazareth where he quoted Isaiah 61:1-2
“ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.....” (Isaiah 61:1-2)
and Jesus said “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

Some have attempted to make the third event the occasion on which God adopted Jesus as his Son. However, this is clearly not how the Gospel writers saw it. John states right at the beginning of his Gospel that Jesus was the Son of God even before the universe existed.

There has been much speculation about the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. However, neither scripture nor external sources give us any real answers. I believe that they probably conducted independent ministries in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The Temptation of Jesus

Intimately associated with the baptism of Jesus is his temptation, both Mark and Matthew make it clear that this followed swiftly after the baptism (Mark 1:12; Matthew 4:1). No explanation is given as to why the temptation was necessary, although it was apparently God's will since we are told that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. In order to plunder Satan's kingdom Jesus would have to defeat him and the temptation was to be the first of Satan's defeats. We might also ask how the Gospel writers obtained their material since only Jesus and Satan are stated to be present. Presumably, Jesus must have shared these events with the disciples, or at least some of them, as part of their spiritual training.

The question of the nature of the temptations also arises – were they real and objective or subjective and visionary? At least one temptation (that on the high mountain) must have had visionary elements since there is no place on earth from which the whole of it is visible. I believe they were probably subjective and visionary – but let us never forget that the temptations truly came from Satan and were truly experienced by Jesus.

Matthew and Luke contain the most detailed account of the temptations and although they differ as to the order in which these occurred, probably because of their different theological emphasis, or possibly because temptations on the three themes recurred) they do agree as to their nature.

They are both agreed that the first temptation was

“The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”” (Luke 4:3)

Like Satan’s original temptation of Eve, this first temptation involves eating. Jesus had been in the wilderness fasting for forty days and he was hungry. Satan’s statement and Jesus’ response both imply that as the Son of God he had the power to perform this miracle.

Jesus’ response was “man does not live by bread alone” (Luke 4:4).

Generally, there is nothing wrong with satisfying our hunger, but for Jesus this temptation was about how he would carry out his mission. Would he use his power in the material world, at least partially for his own ends, or use it spiritually? Would he depend on God and serve him in obedience, faith and submission?

Taking Matthew’s order the second temptation was:

“The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, “throw yourself down from here.”” (Luke 4:9)

In support of his challenge Satan quotes from OT scripture:

“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91:11-12)

Jesus’ response was brief and pointed:

“[scripture] says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:12)

I don’t believe that Satan was here tempting Jesus into making a spectacular sign to cause the people of Israel to follow him, there is no mention of a crowd of onlookers, or indeed of any observers at all. Rather I believe that Satan was tempting Jesus to ‘dare’ God to supernaturally save him. I think there is a strong lesson for us all here. In depending on God we must be careful that any ‘leap of faith’ does not amount to an unwarranted dare. There is a fine line between depending on God for one’s needs in life and asking God to rescue us from difficulties we have ourselves created or invited.

The third temptation was to worship Satan:

“The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”” (Luke 4:5-7)

Since Jesus did not challenge Satan’s ability to make such an offer, we may assume that Satan is indeed the ruler of this present age. The question of what would happen in the final judgement with respect to Satan’s authority was not an issue here; we can assume that Satan had authority at that time. This amounts to a temptation of Jesus to win the world without drinking the ‘cup’ which God the Father would call him to drink. We can assume that such a ‘crossless’ solution would have resolved all problems of hunger, war, injustice, poverty and so on. However, it would not have dealt with the problem of our sin and our need to be reconciled to God. Such a victory by Jesus would have been hollow - “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

However, Jesus was well aware that any path which denied God as the one supreme God would come to nothing and so he responded to Satan in the only way he could: “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” (Matthew 4:10)

After this third temptation Satan gave up for the time being and left Jesus (Matthew 4:11).

Here Jesus settled the issue of what kind of Messiah he would be. He rejected all political concepts, especially the path of the Zealots and accepted the path of the suffering servant that God had ordained for him. As he faced the cross, he would not use his messianic powers to rescue himself. Here, I believe we need to emphasise the humanity of Jesus. Along with the writer of Hebrews, I believe that Jesus had the capacity to sin and was genuinely tempted, but was without sin (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15).

The Call of the Disciples

Jesus then began his public ministry. Apart from a few events of lasting importance, I’m not going to attempt to deal with the details of Jesus’ preaching, travels and actions during the years of his public ministry

One of Jesus’ first acts as he began his ministry was to select twelve disciples. This number was no doubt a deliberate choice selected to symbolise the twelve tribes of Israel, which were to be restored and reunited when God established his kingdom.

Within the Gospels, there are three listings of the disciples:

Mark 3:13-19	Matthew 10:1-4	Luke 6:12-16
Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)
James son of Zebedee	His brother Andrew	His brother Andrew
John (Boanerges, Sons of Thunder)	James son of Zebedee	James
Andrew	His brother John	John
Philip	Philip	Philip
Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Bartholomew
Matthew	Thomas	Matthew
Thomas	Matthew the tax collector	Thomas
James son of Alphaeus	James son of Alphaeus	James son of Alphaeus
Thaddaeus	Thaddaeus	Simon the Zealot
Simon the Cananaean	Simon the Cananaean	Judas son of James
Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot

There is also a fourth listing of the disciples in Acts 1:13 which contains the same names.

Apart from the symbolism of the number twelve already noted, Jesus called this diverse body of men to “be with him”. They were selected to be with him during his ministry, to learn from him and of him. They uniquely witnessed his actions and deeds and heard his teachings. He also called them to become his apostles “ones sent out” to preach his message and help in his ministry. After his death on the cross, these men were to become part of the foundation on which Jesus would build his church. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate

foundation of the church, but the NT also tells us that it is founded on the apostles and the prophets.

The Message Proclaimed by Jesus During the Years of His Ministry

You may be surprised to learn that I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this aspect of Jesus today. I think you may see why towards the end of the day.

Jesus was an extraordinary teacher and he frequently attracted huge crowds. The miracles of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44) and the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10) were directly attributable to this aspect of his ministry. He brought a message that was fresh and new, not simply derived from the traditions of the past. He expressed himself in numerous literary forms including poetry and parables. A central message was the arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:23; Luke 4:42-43 etc) and the phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of Heaven" occur 87 times in the Gospels. It would seem that Jesus believed that the kingdom of God was now realised in and through his coming – although that realisation will not be fully completed until the second coming. Jesus, certainly spoke of this second coming (although he admitted that he did not know the time of this), but many of his prophetic utterances relate to the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. We need to maintain a careful balance between the 'already' and the 'not yet' in our consideration of the kingdom of God.

The ethical teachings of Jesus appear in some ways as paradoxical. They are in a sense new, and yet not new, different and yet familiar. This sense of familiarity derives from the fact that God's character is unchanging, thus Jesus' teachings have a quality of sameness with OT teachings. Most of the sense of newness arises out of the fact that Jesus presented a brilliant selection of what is most important out of a host of teaching and tradition – and this in a day when OT teachings were weighed down by layers of tradition and Pharisaical additions.

Although there is this strong sense of continuity with OT Laws and teachings, Jesus did not come to 'observe' the Law, rather he came as the 'fulfilment' of the Law. The prophets and the Law both pointed towards Jesus and by suffering in his own body the death penalty prescribed for breaking the Law Jesus secured our deliverance from judgement under the Law. Thus although he said "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matthew 5:17), I believe we must differentiate between 'observe' and 'abolish'. Jesus was the final Interpreter of and Authority over the Law and its meaning, as other passages in Mathew indicate. Jesus restated some of the Old Testament laws (Matthew 19:18–19), but some he modified (Matthew 5:31–32). Some he intensified (Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28), and others he changed significantly (Matthew 5:33–37, 38–42, 43–47). Some laws he abrogated entirely (Mark 7:15–19). Jesus was not advocating the continuation of the traditional Jewish approach of adherence to the Law. Nor was he advocating that the Law be dismissed altogether. He was proclaiming that the meaning of the Law must be interpreted in light of his coming and in light of the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant which was shortly to be made in his blood and also that the Law should not be interpreted narrowly as Law, but rather more widely in the light of its moral foundations.

The whole question of how and to what extent Christians today are subject to OT Law is a fascinating topic in itself, but unfortunately it's too far away from our main subject matter for me to tackle it in any detail today.

Jesus' ethical teachings are intimately connected to the coming of the kingdom of God. Since God is unchanging these teachings have continuity with OT teachings and are unchanged in so far as the OT teachings stem from the moral character of God himself. Yet, with the arrival of the kingdom in and through the person of Christ, the attainment of this holiness has been enhanced by the 'already' aspect of the kingdom we mentioned. We move from the 'childhood' of the Law to the 'adulthood' of the New Covenant' and with that development comes both freedom and responsibility. Paul expresses this clearly in his epistle to the Galatians (Galatians 4:1-7).

We now really see what it means to love outcasts, sinners and enemies, but we are supported in this by the knowledge that we are indeed God's children and can call him Abba and that we have been forgiven and receive continual forgiveness. Whilst we are called to renounce the world, the flesh and the devil we know that Satan has been defeated and we are heirs of the kingdom.

In his teaching ministry Jesus also challenged us to reflect on who he really was (e.g. with the rich young ruler Mark 10:18). Jesus revealed his own understanding of who he was in three ways, (i) through his actions, (ii) through what he said and (iii) by the titles and worship he accepted.

Jesus' actions present a unique claim to authority. He claimed authority over the Temple (Mark 11:15-19), over demons (Mark 1:27, 32-34), over Satan (Mark 3:27), over sickness and disease (Mark 1:29-31, 40-45), over natural forces (Mark 4:35-41) and even over death (Mark 5:21-43). He also performed actions that were the exclusive prerogative of God such as the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:7; Luke 7:49). Although OT prophets such as Moses and Elijah had worked miracles, the scope and extent of the miracles performed by Jesus combined with his claim to forgive sins constituted a unique claim to be the Christ.

Jesus stated that he possessed authority over the Law (Matthew 5:31-32, 38-39) and, as we have already noted, even felt free to revise or annul certain aspects of the Law – which was considered damnable by the Israelites (b Sanhedrin 99a). He also claimed the divine prerogative of judgement (John 5:22). Jesus also uttered an absolute demand for allegiance, stating that our futures – Heaven or Hell – centred on that response (Matthew 10:32-33; Matthew 11:6). He also claimed to be the 'only' Son of God (Mark 12:6; John 3:16).

The claims to be God implicit in Jesus' words and actions were made clear in his acceptance of worship – which might only be lawfully offered to God – on a number of occasions. Jesus accepted worship from the disciples (Matthew 14:33), from a blind man he healed (John 9:38) and after his resurrection (Matthews 28:9).

The Events at Caesarea Philippi – The Turning Point of Jesus' Ministry

Towards the end of his public ministry, Jesus and the disciples made a journey into the primarily Gentile region of Tyre, Sidon, Caesarea Philippi and the Decapolis (a federation of ten cities in the north of Israel that were under Greek influence). Jesus specifically withdrew from his usual area of ministry to impart important additional teaching to his disciples and to prepare them for the coming events of his passion. Indeed what the disciples learned during this time became a foundation of their later preaching.

The location Jesus chose for this teaching is interesting. Caesarea Philippi nestles at the foot of a sheer cliff at the base of Mount Hermon where a major source of the river Jordan emerges as a full blown river straight from the cliff face. It was a shrine of pagan religions with niches carved into the cliff containing statues of gods, including a statue of Caesar who was thought to be a God and Pan a god who appeared on earth as a man – indeed the old pagan name for Caesarea Philippi was Pansis or the city of Pan. Here the boundary between the human and the divine could be seen as blurred, an interesting spot for Jesus to teach the disciples who he was.

Jesus commenced by eliciting a firmer and deeper understanding of who he was. Having made the disciples expound who others thought he was, he then made them tell who they thought he was (Mark 8:29). Peter responded for the disciples “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus commanded all the disciples to tell this to no one, probably because such an open confession would have raised false hopes and brought about an open conflict with the Roman authorities before Jesus was ready for it – because of the political connotations attributed to the Messiah.

Following Peter’s acknowledgement of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus then began to teach the disciples about the real substance of his mission – his death and resurrection.

“[Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mark 8:31-32)

Matthews' gospel makes it even clearer that this was a fundamental turning point in Jesus’ ministry:

“ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (Matthew 16:21).

Although Jesus had previously alluded to his death, he was now specifically preparing the disciples for this event, and the references to his death became clearer and more frequent (e.g. Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:32-34, 38-39, 45; 12:1-12; 14:3-9, 34).

This preparation of the disciples was most necessary. Despite Peter’s confession, neither Peter nor the other disciples understood what this meant. Prior Jewish expectations concerning the Messiah and his mission were too strong. Indeed Peter’s initial reaction was to completely reject Jesus’ teaching (Mark 8:32-33). For me this episode has great historical credibility – who would invent an episode in which one of the Church’s greatest heroes was called Satan?

The Transfiguration

The transfiguration is closely attached to the events of Caesarea Philippi by one of the few chronological connections found in the Gospels. Apparently the transfiguration took place six days after the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 9:2; Matthew 17:1). Apart from the events between Palm Sunday and the resurrection and the observing of the Law with regard to the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:21-22), we find few other specific chronological connections in the Gospels.

We are not certain where this took place as the location is merely given as ‘a high mountain’ (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2). Once again, the Gospel writers were less concerned with geographical and chronological detail than theological detail. It is overwhelmingly likely that it was Mount Hermon, as Caesarea Philippi lies on the lower slopes of that mountain, and other possible candidates appear less likely for various reasons.

On this occasion, Jesus took with him three disciples – Peter, James and John. No reason is given for this, but they do seem to have formed a leadership hierarchy amongst the twelve (see Mark 5:37; Mark 14:33). Jesus was transfigured – that is he underwent a supernatural transformation – before the disciples (Mark (9:2). This was clearly not a natural phenomenon. Luke adds that Moses and Elijah also appeared “in glory” with Jesus. The disciples apparently understood this as a temporary glorification of Jesus, and the sight was such that they were terrified.

I believe that this was a real event in the life of Jesus rather than a vision or an illusion. Firstly it is quite clear that the Gospel writers understood it in that way and secondly this is also true of the account in 2 Peter 1:16-18. In this latter passage, the transfiguration is seen as foreshadowing the glory Jesus will possess at his second coming. In this context, we should also remember that the passage follows immediately after Mark 8:38 which refers to the Son of Man coming in glory.

We cannot be sure why the transfiguration took place or why Moses and Elijah appeared. Perhaps it was because they were prophesied to appear before the coming of the messianic age.

The final major event that took place at the transfiguration was the speaking of a voice from heaven. In contrast to the voice at Jesus’ baptism which was addressed to Jesus (although for the benefit of the onlookers), the voice here is addressed to Peter, James and John. We are told that the voice said:

““This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”” (Mark 9:7)

The first part of this message was presumably designed to reinforce their belief in who Jesus actually was, whilst the second was reinforcing their need to remember and accept the teachings from Caesarea Philippi and constituted a rebuke of their rejection of Jesus’ conception of the nature of his messianic role.

The voice from heaven frequently delivers a similar message to believers today.

The Journey to Jerusalem and the Triumphal Entry

Luke states that, after the events of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). However, due to the non-chronological arrangement of the Gospel materials we cannot be sure exactly how much time elapsed between Caesarea Philippi and Jerusalem. It is true that the Gospels contain a lot of material between these events, but the arrangement appears to be for literary considerations and we cannot necessarily infer that a long time must have elapsed for all this teaching to have taken place. We can, however, be sure that Jesus continued to prepare the disciples for his passion (Mark 9:31-32; 10:33-34, 45; 12:6-11; 14:6-9, 18-21, 22-25).

The accounts in Mark and Matthew suggest that the route Jesus took to Jerusalem was along the East side of the river Jordan (Mark 10:1; Matthew 19:1). Luke suggests that part of the journey went through Samaria as well (Luke 9:52).

For the Gospel writers Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was of great importance. It is one of the few events recorded in all four Gospels. According to John, Jesus did not go straight into Jerusalem, but came to Bethany (probably about two miles from Jerusalem) first, and then stayed in a nearby area before his entry into Jerusalem (John 11:54 – 12:19).

On the day Jesus entered into Jerusalem, which was probably a Sunday (John 12:1, 12) – now our Palm Sunday – he sent two disciples ahead of him to a village, probably Bethphage (Matthew 21:1-2), to find a donkey and its colt on which no one had ever ridden. They were instructed to untie them and bring them to Jesus and told that if they were asked what they were doing they should say “The Lord needs them and will send them [back] right away” (Matthew 21:3). The disciples found the animals just as Jesus had said, were asked what they were doing, gave a response as instructed and were permitted to take them.

I think this was pre-arrangement by Jesus, otherwise it's unlikely that the owners would have accepted the disciples explanation of why they were taking the animals. This implies that Jesus wanted to enter Jerusalem in this specific manner strongly enough to have pre-arranged the necessary circumstances. In my view, this was indeed a symbolic act of Jesus whereby he understood himself to be and revealed himself as the Christ. The spreading of cloaks on the back of the colt and of cloaks and palm branches on the road (hence our modern name “Palm Sunday”) shows both that the disciples understood this well (Matthew 11:8 – compare 2 Kings 9:13) and that the crowds understood it at least to some extent. Riding the colt not only fulfilled the words of prophecy from Zechariah 9:9, but the fact that it had never been ridden made it particularly suitable for this sacred task. There's an interesting parallel here with 1 Samuel 6:7 and the use of two calves which had never been yoked to pull the Ark of the Covenant when it was returned to the Israelites.

This is the first time we have heard of Jesus riding on any kind of an animal. His decision to ride the last mile or so into Jerusalem after having walked more than 100 miles from Caesarea Philippi can hardly have been because of physical necessity and it's even more remarkable as pilgrims entering Jerusalem for this Feast were expected to do so on foot as a matter of Jewish tradition.

To us a donkey is an object of fun, but in Biblical times it could be the mount of a king. The riding on the colt of a donkey echoes King Solomon's riding to enthronement in 1 Kings 1: 38-40. It's clear that Jesus has not come to slip quietly into Jerusalem. A pilgrim riding amongst all those on foot could hardly fail to be noticed. He is now publicly taking up and announcing his Messianic role – his Messianic claim must now be presented in the capital city of Jerusalem. His time has indeed come. This is also consistent with his public actions in clearing and cleansing the Temple which we'll come to a little later.

But in deliberately presenting himself before Jerusalem as its messianic king, Jesus has chosen an OT model which denies any popular militaristic idea of kingship. The meek, peaceful donkey-rider is not a potential leader of an anti-Roman rebellion. A warrior king would have entered Jerusalem on a horse, an animal symbolic of war.

As they proceeded Jesus was greeted with shouts from Psalm 118, a Psalm used to greet pilgrims during festivals such as the Feast of the Tabernacles and the Passover: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9-10).

Originally the term 'Hosanna' is literally a prayer for help – 'Save us [please]', but as time went on it became a greeting much more like our present day 'Praise the Lord'. The original meaning was clearly very significant in terms of Christ's coming atonement for our sins.

Certainly for Jesus, his entry was messianic in nature, given the special preparations he had made. He rode not on a stallion as a warrior Messiah leading the people to battle. He came humbly and in majesty he rode on – to die. It may be that neither the Roman nor the Jewish leadership saw the triumphal entry as a messianic act, since neither group mentioned the matter during Jesus' coming trial.

The Last Week of Jesus' Ministry

The events of the Triumphal Entry or Palm Sunday, mark the beginning of 'Holy Week' or the last week of Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion and resurrection. As we shall see later there are some difficulties concerning the chronology of the events which took place during that week, but I believe we can be sure of the following: (i) the cleansing of the temple took place shortly after the triumphal entry, (ii) the Last Supper took place just before the crucifixion (1 Corinthians 11:23), (iii) the arrest of Jesus took place in a garden outside Jerusalem late in the evening, after the Last Supper (John expressly mentions that the soldiers sent to look for Jesus were carrying lanterns and torches (John 18:3)), (iv) the following morning Jesus was transferred from the house of the high priest (Caiaphas) to the residence of the Roman Governor to be tried by Pontius Pilate on a political charge, (v) during the hearing with Pilate the question of a Passover amnesty for Jesus was raised by Pilate, (vi) Pilate condemned Jesus to death and an inscription fixed to his cross stated that he was crucified as 'the King of the Jews', (vii) the crucifixion took place on a Friday (Mark 15:42), (viii) Jesus' garments were divided among the soldiers forming his execution squad (four Roman soldiers according to John (John 19:23)), (ix) Jesus died on the cross, (x) he was immediately buried in a rock tomb, and (xi) the resurrection took place on a Sunday (Mark 16:1).

The Cleansing of the Temple

The temple of Jerusalem in Jesus' day was a truly magnificent structure. It bordered on the Kidron valley in the east and on the Tyropean valley in the west, abutted the old city of David in the south and the fortress of Antonia in the north, altogether occupying an area of some 17,000 sq. metres. This was the largest structure of its kind in the ancient world, bigger than a dozen football fields. It was not a square or rectangular area, but trapezoidal, with the north and west sides being longer than the south and east.

The platform of the temple area was supported by massive walls that contained the huge quantity of rubble that had been used to flatten the site as well as supporting the great weight of the temple itself. These walls descended more than 50 feet below the level of the street, rested on bedrock, and ascended more than 80 feet above the level of the street. Some of the stones of that wall still visible today are more than 40 feet long and weigh more than 100 tons. If we are to believe Josephus' account many larger stones were originally incorporated.

This temple was the result of continual building and restoration. This rebuilding continued until shortly before its destruction in 70 AD.

The temple was mostly covered with gold and what was not gold was bright white stone. The roof consisted of gold spikes to prevent birds from defiling it. It was truly magnificent.

On entering the temple area (probably through the golden gate which faced the Mount of Olives), Jesus saw in the court of the Gentiles the selling of sacrificial animals and the exchanging of money. Each year, around the time of the Passover, every adult Jewish male had to pay a temple tax of a half shekel (Exodus 30:13-15). However, much of the coinage of ancient times had idolatrous images or words and the only coin deemed acceptable for the temple tax was the Tyrian silver half shekel. These coins were not easily available throughout Israel, so to facilitate the payment of this tax, tables were set up in the court of the Gentiles around the 25th day of Adar (the month preceding the Passover). Sacrificial animals were generally on sale in the court of the Gentiles.

In one sense, the changing of money and the selling of sacrificial animals could be seen as a service to pilgrims – an attempt to make the temple more ‘user friendly’. In most areas there would have been no access to the required Tyrian coins and sacrificial animals needed to be absolutely pure and unblemished, so bringing them from afar would have been a perilous business. However, these activities were conducted with the primary objective of making large profits for the priestly leadership, the money changers typically charged a whole days wages to change your money and another days wages if you needed change, whilst a sacrificial lamb could cost half a years wages. Also the commercial clamour and smell of the animals severely detracted from the God ordained purpose of the temple. It is likely that these activities had only recently been moved into the temple area, as there is evidence that the stalls of these merchants were previously situated on the Mount of Olives.

In righteous indignation, Jesus cleansed the temple of these rather sordid commercial activities. He overturned the tables of the money changers and chased away those in the business of selling sacrificial animals – and indeed their customers.

It is clear that this event in the life of Jesus was regarded as extremely important as it is one of the few events recorded in all four Gospels.

So, what is the meaning of the cleansing of the Temple. In my view, the cleansing of the temple is best seen as an expression of Jesus’ desire to purify the temple. Here he was eliminating dishonest commercialisation. On other occasions he refused to allow the temple to be used as a shortcut from one part of Jerusalem to another (Mark 11:16). At the same time, I believe that Jesus was also proclaiming divine judgement on the temple. He was not merely prophesying this but proclaiming it and declaring that he would bring it about.

The Last Supper

The date of the Last Supper is probably the biggest difficulty we face in reconciling the chronology of Holy Week in terms of the various Gospel accounts. The Synoptics appear to place this on Thursday evening/Friday, 15 Nissan = Passover, whereas John appears to place it on Thursday evening/Friday 15 Nissan = eve of Passover. However, means of reconciling this difference can be found. For reasons of time, all I’m going to say today is that the

differences of chronology can be reconciled in terms of different ways of counting days which existed at that time and the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal.

This chronology has been debated by NT scholars from earliest times. Personally, I firmly believe that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal. This not only accords with the Synoptic accounts, but also makes much more theological sense and there are many indications within the various Gospel accounts pointing towards the Last Supper having been a Passover meal. Firstly, the disciples did not return to Bethany that night, as they had on previous days, but remained within the walled city to eat. That is consistent with this being a Passover meal – which had to be eaten within Jerusalem proper. Secondly, we are told that Jesus and the disciples ate this meal reclining. Normally people sat for meals and it was only for festive meals such as the Passover that they would recline facing a low table with their feet radiating outwards like spokes. Thirdly, people usually only ate two meals per day with the last of these being in the later afternoon and not the evening, but we are told that the Last Supper was eaten in the evening (Mark 14:17). This corresponds with the Passover meal which had to be eaten at night (Exodus 12:8). Fourthly, the Last Supper ended with a hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) and we know that it was customary to end the Passover by singing the last part of the Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118). Finally, the night of the Passover had to be spent within Jerusalem. At the time of the Passover, the population of Jerusalem increased from its normal 25,000 to more than 250,000. Not all of these pilgrims could be accommodated within the walled city. Accordingly, Jerusalem was redefined to include all the hills facing the city. The garden of Gethsemane lay on the western slopes of the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem. We know that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples did not return to Bethany, but stayed at Gethsemane, which was part of ‘greater Jerusalem’. This all fits well with the Last Supper having been a Passover meal.

If that is indeed so, the only way to make sense of the chronology and reconcile the Gospel accounts is to assume either that different Jewish sects followed a different Passover chronology or that the regulations permitted Passover to be spread over two separate days because of the logistical difficulties (slaughtering lambs and preparing) involved. This latter theory seems unlikely, as it would involve a breach of the regulations governing the festival. Therefore, we need to look at the credibility of the theory of a chronological difference.

I don't want to go into the details of this today as it would take too much time. Those who are interested in the details can look at the notes on my website. Let me just say that I believe the answer lies in the fact that there is more than one way to define a ‘day’ – either from sunset to sunset or sunrise to sunrise. Some scholars believe that the Galileans and the Pharisees used the sunrise to sunrise reckoning whilst the Judeans and the Sadducees used the sunset to sunset reckoning. Thus Jesus and the disciples (using the sunrise to sunrise reckoning) slaughtered the Paschal lamb late afternoon Thursday Nissan 14 and ate it that evening. The Judean Jews (using the sunset to sunset reckoning) would slay the lamb on Friday afternoon at the end of Nissan 14 and eat it that night (which had become Nissan 15). Thus, Jesus had eaten the Passover meal when his enemies who had not yet had the Passover arrested him.

This view satisfies both the Synoptics and John. It is also substantiated by the Mishnah which states that it was the custom of the Galileans to do no work on the day of the Passover whilst the Judeans worked until midday. The Galilean's day began at sunrise and they did no work on the Passover by their reckoning and neither did the Judeans for whom the Passover began at sunset.

Accepting the foregoing reasoning that the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal, we can now look at the historical events that took place. We see from the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus sent Peter and John into Jerusalem to prepare the Passover meal (Luke 22:8). Jesus told them to look for a man carrying a jar of water and to follow him. They were then to ask the owner of the house the man entered if the room was prepared for the 'Teacher' and his disciples to eat the Passover. They were to prepare for the feast in that place.

As with the provision of the colt for the triumphal entry, it would appear that Jesus prearranged this event, as the disciples were simply to mention the 'Teacher' to the householder and expect that everything would be ready for them. Certainly, it is unlikely that a choice upper room would be available at the busy time of the festival unless matters had been prearranged. It would also appear that Jesus utilised his divine powers to direct the disciples, as it would have otherwise been difficult to time the meeting with the water carrier. Carrying water was a woman's work, and thus a man doing this would have been an unusual sight and readily apparent to the disciples.

Peter and John were to prepare for the meal. Perhaps they had to sacrifice and roast the lamb, or perhaps this had already been done by the house-owner and they just had to make sure everything was ready – we don't know.

All four Gospels also inform us that Jesus foretold his betrayal by one of the disciples. The Gospel writers thought this was important, not merely because it portrayed Jesus as a true prophet, but also because it makes it clear that the coming crucifixion was no accident, but rather a part of the divine plan from the beginning.

Aware that his hour had come Jesus used the occasion of the Passover celebration to institute a new 'rite' or sacrament – which we celebrate even to this day as the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. Jesus began his ministry with the sacrament of baptism and, as it was drawing to a close, he initiated the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The Gospel accounts differ slightly as to the details, but let's start by considering what Mark's Gospel has to tell us in Mark 14:22-26

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

We see clearly here all the elements of our current sacrament of the Eucharist. In fact, the term 'Eucharist' derives from the Greek term for 'giving thanks' in verse 22 of Mark's text.

Matthew's account of this rite is identical in all important elements with that of Mark. However, Luke's account (and Paul's text in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – which is the earliest account of the Lord's Supper) apparently derived from a different tradition and differ in one or two particulars. The most important of these is that Luke (and 1 Corinthians) adds the words "which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me" after the "this is my body" in verse 22 of Mark's text.

All four gospel accounts do associate the cup with “blood” and “covenant”. The Jews would have seen this “blood of the covenant” as atoning for the sins of the people. Matthew makes this explicit in Matthew 26:28 when he says
“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

In the Last Supper, Jesus taught that a New Covenant would be inaugurated and sealed through his blood – that is through his voluntary sacrificial death, which was to come. This New Covenant was the ultimate fulfilment and culmination of the Old Covenant. Jesus did not see his death as a tragic human error, but as the fulfilment of God’s will and plan.

The words “do this in remembrance of me” from the earliest account of the Lord’s Supper we possess (in 1 Corinthians), justify our continuance of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Of course it’s natural that Jesus would teach that the New Covenant he was instituting should be remembered in just the same way as the Passover constituted a regular remembrance of the events leading up to the Old Covenant. Here it’s interesting to note that as our Paschal Lamb Jesus has initiated a New Covenant which derives not from the Old Levitical Sinai covenant, but from the Passover which preceded it.

The Lord’s Supper reminds both us and the Church that the cross and Jesus’ death were not an accident or misfortune, but the crowning event of human redemption. The bread and the cup point to the ‘old rugged cross’ and the redemption achieved there by Jesus. The Lord’s Supper also points to the future and speaks of a glorious reunion of Jesus with his followers.

Gethsemane, Betrayal and Arrest

After eating the Passover and instituting the Lord’s Supper in the city of Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples proceeded to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32). By spending the night here rather than returning to Bethany, Jesus was fulfilling the requirements of the Law concerning the Passover, since you will remember that we have already noted that ‘Jerusalem’ for this purpose included the surrounding hills. However, Jesus would not spend the whole night there because his ‘hour’ had come.

When they arrived at Gethsemane, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John and separated himself from the rest in order to pray (Mark 14:32-33). He asked them to share his agony by keeping awake whilst he prayed and also to pray for themselves that they would not fall into temptation (Luke 22:40). Proceeding ahead of the three disciples, but remaining within their hearing (Luke 22:41 says he went about a stone’s throw), Jesus agonised in prayer. Probably our knowledge of Jesus’ prayers comes from the three disciples, as it would have been normal for Jesus to pray aloud.

The Gospel accounts make it clear that Jesus suffered great torment at this time. He was said to be “distressed and troubled” and “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:33-34). His prayer to his Father was
"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36).

After a time, Jesus came back to the three disciples and found them sleeping. Warning them to keep watch so that they would not fall into temptation, Jesus again went to pray. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matthew 26:42; Mark 14:39) tell us that he prayed the same prayer again. Upon returning to the disciples, Jesus found them sleeping again.

The image of Jesus presented to us here is not that of someone going to their death with a complete lack of concern, so what was Jesus afraid of? To some extent, he probably feared pain and physical death – after all Jesus was completely human as well as completely divine. However, I am convinced that his main concern was not pain and death itself, but the unique death he knew he was to die. He who had no sin feared being made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), he feared bearing our sins in his body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), he feared dying for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus feared the consequences of drinking the ‘cup’ that God had ordained for him (Mark 10:38), the experiencing of the divine wrath that is our righteous God’s only response to sin and the consequent separation from his Father for the very first time.

We are given God’s promise that he will never leave us or forsake us in our trials (Hebrews 13:5), Jesus, however, knew that he would be separated from his Father at the very time of his greatest trial. Nothing tells of the seriousness of sin in God’s eyes more than Jesus’ anguished cry from the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Given Jesus’ complete divinity and the numerous predictions he had given concerning his death, I don’t believe he really thought there was another way for God’s salvation plan to be accomplished when he prayed in the garden. I think this prayer is best understood as an agonised expression of his pain. In this pain, we see perhaps the first occasion on which Jesus needed the disciples to share in his agony. The tragedy was that they failed him – indeed they were already beginning to forsake him.

Numerous theories have been advanced as to why Judas betrayed Jesus, but none of them are convincing, the Gospel writers were more concerned to show that this was part of the divine plan than to detail the human factors involved. In any event that betrayal was now come. Having left the Last Supper early (John 13:27-30) he had supplied the necessary information of Jesus’ whereabouts to the Jewish authorities. Jesus’ hour had now come. In one sense, it was the hour of Jesus’ opponents, but it was actually God’s hour.

Aware that Judas was approaching with an armed band, Jesus went out to meet them. This was no weak, frightened or defeated Jesus, but a conquering Christ who went out to meet and defeat his opponents by the cross. Apparently, a considerable number of people came to arrest Jesus. Mark refers to a crowd with swords and clubs (Mark 14:43) and John adds a ‘detachment’ of soldiers (John 18:3). The word John uses ‘speira’ can refer to either 600 or 200 soldiers – probably the smaller number in this case.

Jesus’ response to those coming to arrest him was full of sarcasm:

"Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." (Mark 14:48-49)

He knew they lacked the courage to move against him openly and he rebuked them.

The disciples reacted to these events with consternation and fear and fled – apparently with the exception of Peter who lashed out with his sword and struck the ear of the high priest’s slave (John 18:10). Jesus rebuked Peter, for those who live by the sword die by the sword. Peter now felt rejected in addition to being fearful and confused and he too fled.

Mark also records a young man who fled naked (Mark 14:51-52). Some have dismissed this as fanciful or mythical, but I see no reason to depart from the earliest commentators who believed that the story was autobiographical and that the young man was Mark.

Above all these scenes from Jesus' life reveal to us the terrible nature of sin. Jesus was overwhelmed at Gethsemane by the horror of what was to come – his taking our sins on his shoulders – because he well knew that these sins merited and would receive the full wrath of God.

The Trial

The accounts of the trial (or trials) in Matthew and Mark say that Jesus was tried by the Sanhedrin under Caiaphas on the religious charge of blasphemy on the night of his arrest. Luke states that Jesus was interrogated by Caiaphas and some of the high priests the morning after his arrest (but implies that this was not a formal trial), who then send Jesus off to Pilate. John states that Jesus was interrogated by the former high priest Annas and then sent to Caiaphas who sent him on to Pilate, without any formal trial, to be tried on a political charge of treason. The question of the competence of a Jewish court to execute a capital sentence (mentioned by John) is also relevant here. It would seem to me most likely that the accounts in John and Luke are both correct (they are largely in agreement other than the additional detail of the interrogation by Annas added by John) and that Mark and Matthew misunderstood the informal interrogation of Jesus as a formal trial.

During the questioning of Jesus under Caiaphas, Peter failed Jesus again with his famous triple denial of his Lord.

Caiaphas and the remainder of the Sanhedrin formulated various political charges on which they would commit Jesus to trial by the Roman authorities – probably because they lacked the power to execute Jesus on their own authority. All the Gospels agree that Jesus was sent to the praetorium for trial before Pontius Pilate.

Matthew's Gospel provides a short aside at this point and tells us that Judas hanged himself in remorse, having previously failed to return the blood money he received for betraying Jesus to the chief priests.

Pilate appears to have focussed his questioning on the charge that Jesus was 'King of the Jews' – the only thing of which Jesus had been accused which would have been a capital crime under Roman Law. Jesus said that he was, but that his kingdom was of another world. In any event Pilate was convinced that Jesus was not guilty of any crime worthy of the death penalty and, having discovered that Jesus was born in Galilee, attempted to rid himself of the problem by sending Jesus off to Herod who was tetrarch of Galilee.

Jesus remained silent before Herod and, in apparent frustration after mocking Jesus (Luke 23:11), Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

Upon Jesus' return, Pilate continued to seek his release, perhaps spurred on by his wife's dream concerning Jesus' innocence (Matthew 27:19) and offered to have him flogged in an attempt to appease his opponents. This attempt was rejected so Pilate appealed to the custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover (Mark 15:6). There is no evidence for this custom in Israel outside the Gospels (although a similar practice did exist in Egypt), but such a practice would

clearly have been very appropriate for the Jewish Passover festival. No doubt, Pilate was confident that the crowd would ask for the release of the popular Jesus rather than the other candidate – the notorious murderer Barabbas. However the crowd, stirred up by the chief priests called for the release of Barabbas.

Pilate continued to argue for the release of Jesus. However, his reluctance was finally overcome when the Jewish leaders called out “If you release this man you are no friend of the emperor” (John 19:12). This should be seen in the context of a matter we mentioned earlier – the fact that if Jesus’ trial and subsequent crucifixion were in 33 AD (as I have argued) then they fell just after Sejanus’ attempted coup against the emperor Tiberius who subsequently purged almost all those appointed by Sejanus. Pontius Pilate was appointed by Sejanus and would thus have been very afraid for his life at the time and therefore very reluctant to seem disloyal to Rome. The release of Barabbas is interesting here as his name can be interpreted to mean the “Son of the Father”.

Although, as I have argued, the Jewish authorities were the ultimate cause of Jesus’ death, this should not be seen as a reason or an excuse for anti-Semitism. Jesus was Jew. His earliest followers were all Jews. That makes the charge that Jews are anti-Christian because they killed Jesus absurd. In fact, you and I are the cause of Christ’s death. He went voluntarily to the cross in fulfilment of God’s salvation plan for humanity because of sin – my sins and your sins – and for no other reason. The death of Jesus was a divine necessity.

The Crucifixion

The praetorium to which Jesus had been sent for trial before Pilate was almost certainly the Herodian Palace rather than the Fortress of Antonia as Mark is specific about this (Mark 15:16).

Once sentence had been pronounced we are told that Pilate had Jesus flogged before handing him over to be crucified (Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15). Jesus was then mocked and ridiculed (Mark 15:17-20). It was now Friday morning – the eve of the Sabbath. Josephus’ writings on the Jewish Wars tell us that the flogging and mockery were a completely normal part of the crucifixion process for male offenders under Roman rule. From the praetorium, Jesus was led to the place of his execution, a small hill, which at the time was just outside the walled city, which could be seen at a distance, as executions in these times were intentionally public acts as a warning against crime. Later when the city was enlarged by Herod Agrippa’s third wall, the site came to be within the city. This place was called Golgotha in Aramaic, which translates to Cranium in Greek and Calvary in Latin.

It would appear that Jesus was compelled to carry his cross initially, but that the task was transferred to a man coming in from the country – Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21). Usually the victim was just compelled to carry the crossbeam only as the vertical beam was left in the ground at the site of execution as a constant warning. In any event, it would appear that Jesus’ strength failed him (perhaps the scourging had taken its toll). Indeed, Mark also says that they “brought” Jesus to Golgotha, perhaps implying that he was so weak he needed physical assistance to walk there.

Victims usually carried their cross naked to the place of execution – which added to the shame and humiliation of the process. Perhaps Jewish sensitivity prevented this being required of Jesus as we are told that he was re-clothed with his own garments after the

scourging and mocking (Mark 15:20; Matthew 27:31). At the cross these were removed and divided amongst the soldiers (as was customary at such executions) except that they did not divide his seamless undergarment but cast lots for it (John 19:23-24). This was a fulfilment of the prophecy in Psalm 22:18.

On arrival at Golgotha Jesus was offered wine mixed with Myrrh to drink (Mark 15:23). This was a normal act of mercy accorded to those about to be crucified, as the drink was believed to have a stupefying effect which lessened the pain. Jesus refused to drink it, probably because it would have interfered with his drinking the 'cup' that His Father had given him or perhaps in fulfilment of the vow he made at the Last Supper not to drink again during his incarnation.

Once the victim was fastened to the crossbeam, this was lifted up, located in a notch on the vertical beam, and secured. We are told that Jesus' hands were nailed to the crossbeam (John 20:25) and Luke implies that his feet were nailed to the vertical beam (Luke 24:39). In actuality the nails were normally driven between the two major bones of the wrists (as the bones and tissue of the hands are too weak to support the full weight of the body). This is consistent with the Gospel text as the Hebrew word for hands includes the wrists.

Crucifixion was such a horrible form of death that only Christians have ever spoken of it in a positive manner. It was particularly despised by the Jews as the reference in Deuteronomy 21:23 to anyone hung on a tree being under God's curse was deemed to cover crucifixion.

Mark tells us that Jesus' crucifixion began around nine O'clock on the Friday morning (around the third hour) (Mark 15:25). Although they do not specifically state the time, Matthew and Luke also seem to assume this timescale as they say that darkness came over the land around noon (the sixth hour). John states that Jesus was handed over to be crucified at the sixth hour (John 19:14), but probably John was using the more modern Roman method of timing which began from midnight. That would mean Jesus' trial was around 6 am. The gap between then and the commencement of the crucifixion around 9 am was presumably taken up by the flogging and mockery and the trek to the place of crucifixion itself.

We are told that Jesus was crucified between two bandits or revolutionaries (a better translation of the Greek word *lestes* than thieves or robbers) (Mark 15:27). As already noted we are told that the charge against Jesus – the King of the Jews – was fixed to the cross above his head. During the crucifixion Jesus was again mocked and ridiculed – by the soldiers, passers-by, the Jewish leaders and even his fellow victims.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus uttered seven different sayings from the cross. Luke and John each record three different sayings, whilst Mark and Matthew commonly record a different saying. We don't know in exactly what order these were uttered, but the traditional order is as follows:

Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing
I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise
Dear woman, here is your son ... Here is your mother
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
I am thirsty
It is finished
Father into your hands I commit my spirit

Although both bandits initially mocked Jesus, one later had a change of heart. For what reason we do not know, the second saying only tells us that he received a pardon from Jesus. This is a wonderful witness to the fact that salvation is by grace and not by works. No one is so wicked or evil that they cannot come to Jesus and find mercy and forgiveness – even at the eleventh hour!

The fourth saying is the only one to be found in two Gospels. Interestingly it is the only time that it is recorded in the gospels that Jesus addressed the Father as “My God” rather than “Abba”. Both Matthew and Mark confirm that this was after darkness came over the whole land (Mark 15:33). The darkness is a symbol of God’s coming judgement over Israel. What caused this darkness we do not know. It was certainly not a solar eclipse, as this is impossible during the full moon at Passover time. Perhaps it was a dust storm, a very heavy thundercloud, or divine intervention, but we just don’t know. I believe that the real theological significance of this saying is that God cannot look upon sin, and, as Jesus took the sins of the world on his shoulders and became sin for us, his Father was unable to look upon him and the close communion in which they had lived throughout eternity was temporarily broken.

The sixth saying tells us that Jesus knew that his work had been completed – he was victorious. He had completed the work he had been sent to do and had fulfilled God’s will. These words remind us that nothing needs to be added to the work Jesus did on the cross. Redemption was accomplished once for all and once and for all.

The final saying portrays Jesus’ confidence. He was completely confident that the Father would hear his cry and that he would be resurrected.

Simultaneously with Jesus’ death the veil of the temple was rent in two from top to bottom. This can be seen both as a symbol of judgement on the temple and as indicating that we now have direct access to God. Interestingly, Jews in mourning tear their clothing, so we could also see the rending of the veil of temple as a sign of God’s mourning for his Son.

John tells us that because the following day was the Sabbath, it was necessary for the execution to be brought to completion. The normal procedure – called *crurifagium* – was to break the legs of the victims. This hastened death as it made breathing more difficult. Accordingly the legs of the two bandits were broken, but it was not necessary to do this to Jesus, as he was already dead. One of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear and blood and water came out (John 19:34) – which would seem to be what the medical profession would expect following this kind of death.

The bodies of criminals, especially those executed for treason, were often denied burial, but this did not happen in Jesus’ case. His burial was arranged by the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea who was apparently a secret believer and also a member of the Sanhedrin. At what must have been considerable personal risk he approached Pilate and asked to have the body. Joseph’s action was bold because: (a) he was not related to Jesus (which was a normal requirement to claim the body); (b) his request was a favor that would likely be denied on principle since Jesus had been executed for treason; (c) he risked ceremonial defilement in handling a dead body; (d) his request amounted to an open confession of personal loyalty to the crucified Jesus which would doubtless incur his associates’ hostility. He was a secret disciple no longer. Pilate was astonished that Jesus was already dead, but on confirming that this was indeed so by questioning a centurion, he acceded to Joseph’s request, perhaps

because he didn't really believe that Jesus was guilty. So Jesus' death was immediately confirmed by a Roman military officer. John's gospel tells us that, Nicodemus, who was probably also a secret believer, assisted Joseph in burying Jesus. They placed his body in a rock tomb – which was Joseph's own tomb and had never previously been used. Unlike the Egyptians, Jews did not remove internal bodily organs and practice true embalming, and we are told that Joseph and Nicodemus simply wrapped the body in linen cloths (John 19:40) after covering it with a large quantity of myrrh and aloe spices (John says 75 pounds of spices by modern reckoning, John 19:39). These spices did not eliminate bodily decay and served primarily as deodorants to offset the smell of bodily decomposition.

Once they had finished, the body was laid in the tomb, which was then sealed with a stone. Such tombs generally had an opening about three feet high and this was probably sealed with a stone shaped like a wheel. This stone would have been placed in a trench-like track and would be rolled down the trench to cover the tomb opening, resting securely against a wall. All the Gospel writers other than John state that Mary Magdalene and another Mary were also present observing the burial procedure.

Matthew tells us that on the Sabbath the Jewish leaders appeared before Pilate. They were concerned over Jesus' statements about rising from the dead on the third day. Whether they had re-interpreted Jesus' riddle concerning the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in three days (Mark 14:58) or whether they had heard of Jesus' own resurrection predictions (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) is uncertain. However, they realised that if the disciples were to steal the body of Jesus and claim that he had been resurrected "the last deception would be worse than the first" (Matthew 27:64). Thus, they requested that the tomb be made secure against the possibility of theft. Pilate granted them a guard of Roman soldiers to secure the tomb (Matthew 27:65). The Jewish authorities now sealed the tomb, but on Easter day this would all prove to be for nothing.

In conclusion, let me just say that the crucifixion of Jesus and his burial in a rock tomb are very well attested historical events, possibly the best attested events relating to Jesus, and we should completely and unreservedly accept them as such.

The Resurrection

As we have seen, Jesus' body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea late on Friday afternoon. The following day was the Sabbath and a day of rest, although for the disciples it must have been a day of emotional turmoil. On the Sunday, the greatest event in human history was set to occur. The predictions surrounding Jesus' resurrection stated that he would rise either after three days (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) or on the third day (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; Luke 9:22; 18:33) or in three days (Matthew 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29; John 2:19-20).

In any event on that glorious Sunday morning several of the women who had been important to Jesus during his life discovered that his tomb was empty and were told to inform the disciples (Mark 16:7). Jesus subsequently confirmed his resurrection by appearing to the disciples and many others on a number of occasions.

Matthew refers to a great earthquake (Matthew 28:2) taking place at this time and the angel of the Lord rolling back the gravestone. This earthquake should not be confused with the earthquake which occurred at the moment of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51) and to regard it as

an aftershock is purely speculation. Matthew reports that the earthquake brought fear and panic and the guards fled. When the guards reported what had happened and that the tomb was empty, the Jewish leaders bribed them to say that the disciples had stolen the body whilst they (the guards) were asleep.

Coming to the tomb the women found the stone rolled away. The purpose of the stone's being rolled away was not to allow the risen Christ to leave the tomb – we know that was not necessary (see John 20:19) – but to allow the women to enter and see that the tomb was empty. At this point, the four Gospel accounts become difficult to harmonise. However, something like the following seems to have taken place.

The tomb was discovered empty, and rather than thinking that Jesus had risen from the dead, the women were convinced that someone had come and stolen the body (John 20:2; 13-15). An angelic messenger or messengers told them that Jesus was not dead but had risen. For Mary Magdalene this was confirmed by Jesus himself (John 20:16-17). Told to go and inform the disciples, the women left the tomb and proceeded to do so. The report of the women was greeted with scepticism by the disciples who were also unprepared for the resurrection, in spite of Jesus having taught them clearly about this prior to his crucifixion. The women's report was considered an idle tale (Luke 24:11). Peter and the "other disciple" (John 20:3) ran to the tomb to check and found it just as the women had said. Nevertheless, doubt remained, and was not overcome until Jesus appeared to them.

I do not believe that it is possible to completely harmonise the Gospel accounts of the resurrection on the basis of what we know, but I do believe that it might be possible if more information was available to us. In any event, we know today that different eyewitness accounts of the same event often differ substantially from each other. This should not be seen as diminishing the reliability of these accounts as testifying to the main facts – the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus.

Some twentieth century scholars have sought to deny the empty tomb as an historical reality. However, I consider that there is overwhelming evidence in favour of the historicity of the empty tomb.

- There are multiple attestations as to the empty tomb – which is mentioned in all four Gospels;
- The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection by the disciples and the early church (which was never contradicted by their opponents) assumes the empty tomb;
- Women were portrayed as the witnesses of the empty tomb even though their testimony was not acceptable under Jewish Law;
- The fact of the empty tomb was acknowledged by the Jewish leadership, their invented explanation set out in Matthew 28:11-15 makes it clear that they conceded this point immediately;
- The empty tomb was a well known tomb;
- The earliest church traditions of the resurrection, such as 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, allude to the empty tomb. This was written quite soon after the events, certainly not later than 55 AD, some 20 years after the resurrection.

From the very beginning, opponents of Christianity have sought to propose natural explanations of the empty tomb. The most popular theories have been (i) the women went to the wrong tomb, (ii) Joseph of Arimathea took the body, (iii) Jesus never died on the cross he merely swooned and (iv) the disciples stole the body.

Several factors argue against the first explanation. Firstly, there was not a great deal of time between the burial and the arrival of the women at the empty tomb. It seems unlikely that they would have forgotten its location so quickly. Secondly, this was a private burial tomb. We have no reason to suppose that there were other similar tombs in the area. Finally and most convincingly the authorities could have simply produced Jesus' body from the real tomb when the disciples started to proclaim his resurrection and it would certainly have been very much in the interest of the authorities to do so had this been possible.

Turning now to the second explanation, there is no more historical evidence to support it than a theory that Pontius Pilate stole the body. It is pure supposition. Also, we have to produce a mechanism whereby Joseph could have dealt with the Roman guard who had been told to secure the tomb.

The third proposed explanation strains our credibility even more than the second. To suppose that the detachment of Roman soldiers presiding at the crucifixion would not have been aware whether or not Jesus was dead is unlikely in the extreme. These soldiers would have been well acquainted with death and indeed death by crucifixion (which was a very frequent punishment at the time). Additionally, it is unlikely in the extreme that even a fit man, let alone one who was almost dead, could have rolled away the stone sealing the tombs entrance from inside that tomb. Finally, such a half-dead Jesus, no doubt in need of medical care, would never have been able to convince his disciples that he had indeed risen from the dead. Such a Jesus could never have inspired the post-resurrection faith of the disciples.

The fourth explanation is also rather incredible. Why would the disciples have wanted to steal the body? How could they have circumvented the Roman guard? The disciples had fled at Jesus' arrest and it seems incredible that they could have suddenly found the courage and resolve to engage in such a plot. The supposition that their subsequent courage derived from their knowledge of the resurrection as a reality is far more credible.

However, the early church never relied on the empty tomb as the evidence for the resurrection. Their proclamation was that he died for our sins, was raised and appeared to [various groups of people] (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-41; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). The Christian church has never preached the resurrection of Jesus as a spiritual event or a philosophical abstraction, but rather as a physical fact that occurred on a particular day in history nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus in fact made a large number of appearances that are recorded in the Gospels:

- To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11, 18)
- To the women (Matthew 28:9-10)
- To Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- To the ten disciples (Luke 24:36-40; John 20:19-23; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the eleven disciples (John 20:24-29)
- To the eleven disciples in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
- To five hundred followers (1 Corinthians 15:6; Matthew 28:16-20)
- To James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- And to the disciples at the Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-8)

Even given his physical appearances, the disciples were often reluctant to accept the resurrection (see Luke 24:11, 25, 38). Take, for example, the reaction of Thomas, commonly

called “the doubter” (John 20:24-28). These experiences were not visionary – all the disciples appear to have experienced exactly the same thing! Furthermore, the sudden courage displayed by Peter and the other disciples in proclaiming the “Good News”, as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts can only be explained on the basis that they underwent a real life changing experience the truth of which was absolutely convincing to them. They braved arrest (Acts 5:18), flogging (Acts 5:40) and even death (Acts 7:58). What a transformation from the band of men who had cravenly fled at Jesus’ arrest and had not even dared to attend his crucifixion. I believe it is also significant that Jesus’ brothers became followers and believers after the resurrection.

I believe that the Gospel accounts and the book of Acts provide us with convincing evidence of the reality of the resurrection. They are simple, straightforward and totally believable accounts. In addition Paul’s testimony also testifies to the reality of many of the post resurrection appearances by Jesus.

The Ascension

Christ appeared to his followers for a period of 40 days after the crucifixion (Acts 1:3). During this period, he taught them concerning the kingdom of God. Shortly before Pentecost, Jesus, after commanding his followers to remain in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit, ascended from their presence into heaven. This marked the end of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. What the church now looked forward to was the day when “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11). The life of Jesus is incomplete. We await that day when he will return to share the messianic banquet with his followers (Mark 14:25). This is a day to be longed for by those of us who follow him and love him, so we pray “Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

THE MEANING OF JESUS’ LIFE AND WORK

Jesus was undoubtedly the greatest moral teacher the world has ever seen. Both the content and presentation of his teaching was superb. Yet, in my view, that was not his most important message to us. I believe that his incarnation, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection are his primary message which call us to the only sure way to salvation and eternal life – a true belief in his resurrection and Lordship (Romans 10:9-10).

The question that people most often ask me in this regard is why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn’t our loving God simply forgive our sins? This approach is to fundamentally misunderstand the seriousness of sin.

In order to illustrate this, how much do you have to obey God’s Laws, in order to be righteous. Most Christians will say you have to obey them say 60 or 70 percent of the time, (incidentally that’s exactly what Islam says about keeping God’s laws, but that’s a topic for another day). However, that’s not what God says to us in the Bible he says you must keep them all the time. God’s pass mark is not 60% or 70% or even 99% - its 100%. That’s how seriously God regards sin. It’s also why we could never achieve salvation by ourselves; we can’t achieve 100%. If we’re honest, we know that we sin. As Paul says (Romans 3:23) for all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God. God hates sin, is angered by it and refuses ever to come to terms with it.

The seriousness of sin, even sin itself, is not an acceptable topic today. We downplay the importance of sin.

As I said a moment ago, one of the things that people frequently say to me is “we understand that we have been sinful and that we need to be forgiven, but God is merciful and wants to forgive our sins so why couldn’t he just forgive us. What was the need for Jesus to die a horrible death?” As the cynic Heinrich Heine put it “the good God will forgive me, that’s his speciality”.

I must admit that at first sight the idea of Christ being sacrificed on the cross for our sins sounds like a primitive superstition which should have been discarded long ago. However, the more we look at Christ’s death on the cross the more it makes sense, the more it becomes absolutely central.

Those who express the view that God could simply forgive us are lacking a balanced view of the gravity of sin on the one hand and the majesty and nature of God on the other. God IS completely loving BUT he is also completely just and completely righteous and all these aspects of his nature are unchanging and unchangeable. Let me say that again, God’s nature is immutable – unchanging, unchangeable and absolute. Yes, he is absolutely loving and wants to forgive us, but he is also absolutely just and couldn’t simply forget about our sin. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God. If nothing else, Christ’s agonised cry from the cross when Jesus was separated for the first time from his Father as he assumed our sins should show us the terrible seriousness of sin.

Sin is a rebellion against God’s laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God’s moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breach of these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death”. This does not mean that God’s laws are mechanical, they are alive in God, a part of his nature, and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable.

If we try to bring God down to our level or try to raise ourselves to his level, we see no need of a radical atonement to secure salvation. We need to hear again the words of Peter in 1 Peter 1:17 “since you call on a father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives ... in reverent fear”. When we tremble before God and acknowledge that we are hell deserving sinners the necessity for the cross becomes clear. Perhaps if we spoke less about God’s love and more about his holiness, we might say more with more meaning when we did speak of his love.

Nothing reveals the gravity of our sin like the cross. For what ultimately sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the Jewish priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and all our other sins. I cannot face Christ’s cross with integrity without feeling ashamed of myself. Indeed, in the words of Canon Peter Green “only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross may claim his share in its grace”. “Christ was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5). In other words, Christ died for my sins and yours to bring us forgiveness and healing.

So, God couldn't simply forgive our sins. His just and righteous nature precluded that. Thus, it was necessary either that we should all die as our sins deserved, or that God should somehow arrange for the punishment we deserved to fall on someone else. In his mercy, he took the latter course and the punishment we deserved was suffered by Jesus on the cross.

God's love must have been wonderful. He could, quite justly have abandoned us to the fate our sins deserve – to perish in our sin. But he did not. Because he loved us, he pursued us in Christ – as the good shepherd pursues his lost sheep.

Of course, Jesus well knew that this was his mission on which his Father had sent him, he predicted it many times to the disciples, as we've seen earlier today. Indeed if Jesus had not been a willing substitute for us all, I do not believe his sacrifice would have been effective. But why did Jesus have to come down to earth and suffer this terrible fate.

Really, there is only one simple reason for this – that was the only way the mission could be fulfilled. God's just and righteous punishment could not have been visited on any ordinary man. Our sins already justified our punishment by death – each and every one of us, so we could not act as a sacrifice for anyone else by suffering a punishment we already deserved. On the other hand, God could not suffer a punishment as God, because the guilty sinning party was mankind. Only someone who was both wholly God and wholly man – and that was uniquely Jesus – would do.

We need a balance between awareness of sin and awareness of forgiveness in our Christian lives. If we concentrate on the former we shall be sorrowful and guilt ridden (one author called Christianity the “guilt edged religion”), but if we focus too much on the latter we are likely to carry on sinning as if it didn't matter.

Let's now look at what Christ did for us. Christ took upon himself all the sins of the world past present and future. As he said on the cross “it has been and will for ever remain finished” – he spoke here in the perfect tense. Because he has paid the price for our sins, we are able to stand before God clothed in Christ's righteousness, to escape any condemnation for our sins and enter into salvation or eternal life.

This forgiveness is a free gift from God. Although it was purchased at great price by Christ's life blood all we have to do is to receive it. We cannot earn it or even contribute the smallest element to it. In the words of Saint Paul in Ephesians Chapter 2 and verses 8 and 9 “For it is by grace you have been saved not by works so that no one can boast.”

Also, it's only true, we can only receive salvation, because Jesus willingly died and shed his blood on the cross to pay for my sins and yours. Yes it was by God's will – “.. it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and the Lord makes of his life a guilt offering ...” (Isaiah 53:10) But it was with the consent of Jesus who subordinated his will to the Father throughout his life and especially in the olive grove.

However, we do have to receive this grace, this forgiveness. The world was not automatically put right because Christ died for us, nor have we automatically been forgiven. We need to appropriate his death to ourselves in order for it to be effective.

Fortunately it's extremely simple to be saved - we just need to turn to Jesus, truly believe in his death and resurrection in our hearts and confess him as our Lord with our mouths. And

that's perfectly true, it is exactly that easy and precisely that straightforward. If you have any doubts look at the words of Saint Paul in Romans Chapter 10 verses 9 and 10. But, you do need to do that, your acceptance of God's grace is essential, and if there is anyone here today who has never done these things I urge you to do them right here right now today. Don't wait. Your salvation, your eternal life, is too important to put off to another day.

As we come to a close, let's have a summing up in what we've covered in this closing section on the meaning of Jesus' life. We see that God couldn't simply forget about our sin. Sin is too serious in God's eyes and his nature would not have permitted that. But – "It is finished" - because he loved us so much he sent Jesus Christ to die for us on the cross, which secured the forgiveness of sin; he was the innocent lamb slaughtered to pay for all our sins past present and future – and we should be eternally grateful for what he has done for us. May that gratefulness be reflected in the lives of each and every Christian. In the words of the well known hymn:

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all

We each need to take up our cross and follow the master. I hope today has brought Jesus into a clearer focus for you as a real historical figure and also as our Lord and saviour and has cemented your confidence and belief in the Gospel accounts of his sacrificial saving death and resurrection. I believe there is no other knowledge of comparable importance for us today as belief in them is the key to our salvation.