

My Christian Faith

These days, I identify as a Christian—but usually only if asked. People receive this in various ways, filtered through their own biases, beliefs and prejudices. I don't mind what conclusions they draw. What I actually identify with is 1st century Christianity, known in those times simply as The Way.

I was brought up by atheist parents, in London, at a time when all junior (elementary) schools taught Christianity by default. Each morning we would recite the Lord's prayer and sing stirring hymns such as Onward Christian Soldiers, He Who Would Valiant Be and All Creatures of Our God And King. I didn't know much of what I was singing about but I always felt uplifted singing those songs. Every Christmas we sung carols and did the whole Nativity thing at the local Anglican church.

And then there was Bible study, which mostly consisted of reading and discussing the life and parables of Jesus as captured in the synoptic gospels. I didn't learn religion in those classes, but I did learn socialism. I learned about a man who spread love and hope among the poor, who cared for those worse off than himself, a man who challenged authority, dishonesty and hypocrisy—and who did this through subversive action and confrontation. I learned about a man reckless and unafraid, who despaired of humanity yet never stopped believing in its inherent goodness, and striving for awakening and change.

It was that Jesus that stayed with me all my life, who gave me a path to follow (and from which to frequently stray). An atheist by birth, and by choice, and someone leading a far from exemplary life, I could not help but be drawn to the historical, human Jesus as a model for living in integrity and truth.

At age 36, I made my first serious attempt to overcome drug and alcohol addiction, and was advised I'd need to turn my life over to God to achieve this end. Curious, I began a journey of investigation into Christianity. Maybe this was my heritage. Maybe there was some truth to the nonsense about virgin births, miracles, holy trinity and bodily resurrection. Maybe I was just missing something in my understanding. I spent many years reading theological works, investigating many perspectives. I came to a few conclusions:

The birth story appears entirely fabricated, mostly drawn from the writings of Isaiah, and force-fitted to create a fake past for the prophet who came out of nowhere in his early thirties. There is little historical evidence for the events described in Matthew and Luke, which even tell very different stories. However, given that these tales were concocted forty-fifty years after the death of Jesus, there are symbolic ways of reading them that I find meaningful.

The resurrection occurred, but was one of spirit, not body—and the spirit was in the followers of Jesus. After a few days of silence and fear, they came to realise that although their teacher was dead the teachings lived on. The ideals Jesus was killed for were resurrected in his disciples, who in turn were given new life in the form of courage and determination. It is more nuanced than this, but in essence the resurrection was an awakening in the few that spread to the many.

The miracle stories are fables, folklore, exaggerations, and in some cases faith healings. Essentially stories such as turning water into wine, or feeding the five thousand should be read as metaphors, or miracles of changed hearts. There are far greater ways to understand these “miracles” than to assign magic powers to Jesus. To do so is to diminish the act, and to completely miss the point.

Jesus is a prophet of God. He is not God. He never makes this claim. He is the (a) son of God, in the same way we are all sons and daughters of a loving God, imperfect children needing spiritual guidance.

And finally, I concluded that Jesus was even more of an anarchist and rebel than I had first understood. This man was a rabble rouser, an anti-establishment figure who risked (and lost) his life giving voice to the oppression of his peers. He challenged and threatened the status quo in the name of the people, in the name of fairness and equality, and he preached love and tolerance of all men—neighbours and enemies alike. No differentiation. Jesus was a true revolutionary, and a model of the kind of political leadership we desperately need today.

So, how am I a Christian, and what is my faith? The term Christian comes from the Greek, meaning “little Christ”. It was a term of mockery applied to the earliest followers of The Way, people who were trying to live as Jesus did. I try to live that way too, so I happily adopt the insult. My faith manifests as a belief in a force of love and virtue that is beyond my comprehension and control—a force I comfortably name God. I release into this force through reciting the short prayer, "Thy will, not mine, be done."

Tobias Mayer, January, 2015