

THE FIRST FOLLOWERS OF JESUS were ordinary men and women whose lives were transformed by knowing him. His teaching rang true to them. It challenged them to be honest and compassionate, to delight and marvel at the splendour of creation and the goodness of God, author of life, a true father to all his children. Jesus was able to draw upon their common spiritual inheritance in Jewish religion, make it come alive for them in a fresh way, and lead them to new ways of understanding and relating to God.

Wise teaching on basic questions of the meaning and purpose of life, and what is most to be valued or avoided in life, is found in all the sacred scriptures of the world's religions. The use Jesus made of parables is a unique contribution to this body of literature, because of the way he invited his listeners to think for themselves, to use their own judgement and imagination to draw out and apply meaning to their own situation. Jesus respected the intelligence of his audience. He was forthright with them if he thought they were deceiving themselves. His words do not need to be analysed for hidden secrets or magical power, simply for their capacity to kindle the imagination and open the human heart to the work of God's Spirit.

What most impressed his followers about Jesus was his compassion for all who suffered and those excluded from ordinary life. In his day wonder workers abounded who performed remarkable feats to uphold their claims to special powers. Wherever Jesus spoke about God's love and mercy, sick people he met were healed, either by

direct or indirect contact with him. He was always interested in them, and praised their willingness to trust. He never needed to prove himself. Indeed, he often told people to keep quiet about the fact that they had been healed. He was not out looking for clients, just there to invite people to follow, and share his adventure of faith in God.

BEING WITH JESUS CONVINCED HIS FOLLOWERS that he had a unique relationship to the God of their ancestors. Some began to call him Messiah, meaning Anointed One, a person God appoints and sends to heal and rescue a suffering world, ruined and trapped by the power of evil. He represented God's goodness, God's justice and truth at work re-creating the order of the world. Popular belief held that a Messiah would be super-human, or semi-divine, a sort of super-hero, even a warrior king who would release God's chosen people from their captivity to Roman tyranny. Jesus had all the courage, endurance and confidence of a warrior, but his way of action was non-violent. People were in turn delighted and then disappointed, fascinated and threatened by him, because he did not meet their expectations or behave in conformity with their requirements for a man of God.

He showed that he had the potential to influence crowds of people, and be the focal point for a revolt against authority, but refused to go along with the will of the people. Rather than inflict suffering on others, Jesus chose to accept suffering, and submit to rejection, abandonment, humiliation, torture and death, to defend the truth of his teaching. During his life's terrible

ending, he faced the darkness of evil inflicted upon him alone, only trusting in God, trusting even when he felt God had abandoned him. He lived, to the end, his conviction that the world can only be rescued from the power of evil and violence by enduring and suffering its worst attacks in love, exercising the power of forgiveness.

As he breathed his last, one of his executioners remarked : "Truly this man was a son of God." Even a cruelty hardened soldier could recognise his high spiritual qualities as a man, seeing his endurance of suffering as evidence of holiness. Many people of different faiths, or no faith at all, would see Jesus as a great brave man among mortals, a wise teacher among wise teachers, a man of healing compassion to rank with the great physicians of history and legend. A great original man. But why unique?

CHRISTIANS DECLARE THAT HIS DEATH by crucifixion and burial in a tomb was not the end of the life of Jesus. His followers, numbering up to a hundred and twenty on different occasions, according to St Paul, testified to have seen him alive again, three days after burial. They touched him, spoke with him, ate, drank and prayed with him, and were helped by Jesus to understand God's purpose through his life. Then he commissioned them to share this good news with the world.

As a result, there was no doubt in their minds that Jesus was Son of God uniquely, distinct from the way each of us can be called God's children, since in him '*the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily*'.

Divine and human nature are united in the person of Jesus. To call him 'Son of God' it to claim that he existed beyond space and time before being born as a child of human parents.

In other religions and philosophies the life of Jesus is interpreted so as to portray him as a god in human disguise intervening in human affairs, or as a superhuman, semi-divine hero, or as an enlightened wise man. Christians in the mainstream of traditional belief, regard Jesus to be God's presence in a free fallible, vulnerable, normal human like each of us, but so totally open to divine life in himself, that he makes us look at God differently. Christians believe that relating to God by relating to Jesus is indeed a unique path to a fulfilling life, to health and freedom from evil and fear. He is the human face of God.

In the light of the life and teaching of Jesus, other religions and their teachings must be approached with reverence and respect. Jesus taught that God's love excludes nobody, but embraces humankind, The revelation to the world of God's truth and wisdom is not confined solely to the Gospel message. The divine light and life revealed in Jesus shines through and is reflected in the teachings of Moses, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Muhammad, and other great prophets, who teach love, compassion, forgiveness, trust and surrender to God's will.

Those who recognise and love Jesus as God's Son discover that God communicates his grace and love to those who do not. There is no hindrance to Christians commending their faith to others. In fact,

love compels them to do so, and to rejoice in the faith of others who are different from themselves, just as Jesus did. All are free to choose the spiritual path that leads them to fullness of life, and to help others to find theirs.

Jesus discussed the life of faith with fellow believers of his own religious tradition, with people of other beliefs, also with searchers for faith and truth to live by. His Gospel declared the universality of God's grace. He challenged those who believed only in themselves, and those who were wavering in faith to awaken to true life.

Any questions or comments
arising from this leaflet?
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Christianity for 21st century people

4. What makes Jesus so unique among religious teachers?

Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster Jesus, Muhammad, Lao Tzu, Guru Nanak, Baha'ulula – each was a revered wise and holy teacher whose disciples developed a religious tradition. Each path has its own spiritual qualities and emphasis. Some religions claim to be a superior way to God and human fulfilment. Others do not. Not all Christians are agreed about the part Christianity and the Church should play in the destiny of mankind. But all are agreed that Jesus is unique among world religious teachers, that other religious teachings should be seen in the light of who he is and what he teaches.

In what way is Jesus unique?

*Is the 'way to God' exclusively through
Jesus?*

*What does all this mean for followers of
other religions?*

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