

*Lamb of God, I look to Thee;
Thou shalt my example be;
Thou art gentle, meek, and mild;
Thou wast once a little child.*
Charles Wesley

For all the respect, admiration and even adoration that's been offered to Mary over the last two centuries, it's surprising that so much of it has been focussed on her faithfulness at Jesus' birth, and so little on the fact that she was still standing by him at the end of his life. If we're honest, Jesus wasn't actually the kind of son most mothers would want. While every faithful mother of the time might have prayed that her child would be the Messiah, she wouldn't really have wished for *this* kind of Messiah.

There are many stories we have about Jesus which tell us he was wise and gentle. There are just as many that tell us he was a troublemaker and rebel. To many of the people he encountered – ordinary, righteous people – he was considered a disgrace. He publicly argued with moral crusaders and religious leaders. It seems he wasn't even that popular amongst his peers. At Easter we celebrate his execution in a style that was reserved for those who defied the government. There would have been no glory in this for those who loved Jesus. A Messiah could hardly come in a more disreputable form.

There's enough historical evidence to allow us to be confident that the person, Jesus of Nazareth, existed. Historians of the time make mention of him and the events surrounding his death and the movement that grew after him. They're only passing references, and they don't make any theological claims that settle the case about who he was.

What we know from the Roman historian, Tacitus, is that Jesus of Nazareth was called Christ (which means the Anointed one) by many of his followers, and that he was executed under the orders of Pontius Pilate. There's also some similar evidence from writings by Josephus, a Jewish historian who was writing in the first century. He wrote of "James, the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ". The significant thing about this is that Josephus assumed that his readers would know who Jesus was.

In other historical writings there are some very brief fragments about Jesus, and the movement that formed around him after his death.

It's not much to go on. And, to be honest, knowing that Jesus lived, and that a movement formed around him after his death, doesn't prove much more about him than, well, just that.

We do also know a little about the culture and community that Jesus was part of. He grew up in a small village in Galilee, called Nazareth. Galilee was under Roman rule at the time. It was a very tense and unstable political environment. As a result, the traditional culture and national identity of the Galileans was under threat. The country was becoming more urban and cosmopolitan. The agricultural system that had underpinned the economy and culture was being commercialised, and people

were being forced off their land. This description doesn't do the crisis justice. It was a tumultuous time. Everything was changing. The world was no longer as they knew it.

The Jewish people, as they always did, looked for a theological reason for the crisis. They believed that they were God's chosen people, that God had given them their own land and freedom. Being under Roman rule was oppressive, not just in terms of lifestyle. It went against everything they understood about themselves and their relationship with God. It forced them to question why the situation had come to this, and what had gone wrong between them and God.

In times of change and crisis, people always look for prophets, for someone to show a way out or a way through. It was no different then. In Jesus' time there were many people who were wandering the countryside proclaiming revolution and calling the country to repentance.

Once we understand the context of Jesus' life, we have to look to the Bible, and try to look behind the interpretations and misinterpretations that have layered over the stories since they were first told and later written. It's a complicated process.

To begin with, the stories themselves differ in the four gospels. Some overlap, some are completely different, some tell of the same experience from a different perspective. The stories weren't written down without agendas or motives. The people who wrote them did so with a particular audience in mind. They were interpreting the message already. That's a process that continues today – and maybe that was what was intended with the story. It needs to be interpreted into every context. But we need to find what's at the heart of the story for the interpretation to have any credibility.

At the very beginning of each of the gospels, we get the idea that something completely different was about to happen. Only two of the gospels mention Jesus' birth. They differ in their details, and many Christians would want to question their historical veracity and the doctrines that have been developed around them. But what they do say, whether we understand them metaphorically or literally, is that the advent of Jesus was a rupture. It marked something remarkable and unprecedented. Things had changed. The people who first told these stories believed that this signalled a radically new way of understanding God. God didn't come in clouds of glory, but in a way that was unrecognised, unimportant, insignificant. Blink and you'll miss it. Look in the wrong place, and you would never know it had happened. But those who were looking in the right place discovered more than they ever imagined.

After Jesus' birth, his family don't get much of a mention. We know they were peasants, living in a small village. Jesus had siblings. It doesn't seem likely that he got married. We can only speculate about his childhood, apart from a story that's told of him when he was twelve, running away from his parents to return to the temple to discuss the finer points of religious doctrine. If later character is any guide, it seems unlikely that he was as gentle, meek and mild as many of the hymns written about him would like to suggest.

He left his own work as a carpenter when he was 30, found a group of people who, without much of a backward glance, were willing to leave everything behind to travel with him. They wandered the countryside together for a period of between one and

three years, preaching, teaching and healing. He had little regard for what people thought of him. He associated with women of questionable moral background, and with corrupt businessmen who used their positions to screw people over. He touched the untouchable, he raged against systemic injustice – particularly that of the religious institutions. Most frustratingly, he evaded almost every question about himself. He preached a message that confused everyone who tried to categorise him. Over and over again, when those closest to him thought they had him all worked out, Jesus would tell them they had it wrong again.

At the end of it all, we have no idea who Jesus thought he was. We don't know whether he believed he was the Messiah or the Son of God. That's a topic of debate which has filled the minds of theologians ever since.

What he was most passionate about – like the Israelite prophets who had preceded him for centuries, and the fellow prophets who were travelling through the country at the same time – was the Kingdom of God. Jesus described it as a time and place where the oppressed would be free, where the prisoners would be released, where the blind would find sight. And instead of just talking about it, he showed people how it might actually look. Jesus said that the time for the kingdom of God to come was now, and that it wouldn't come through might, power and glory.

There was much that was controversial about Jesus. Perhaps the thing that was most controversial was that where religion had always been based on the premise that if people weren't clean or pure enough they could not come close to God, Jesus said it was with those who weren't clean or pure that God would be found. It was in the company of the excluded that people would discover the presence of God. Jesus said that those who were poor were closer to God than those of us who aren't. Those who grieve know something of God the rest of us can't fathom. Those who make peace are touching the heart of God, in a way the rest of us don't.

It's a message that was too hard for people of faith to accept then, and not much has changed. Many Christians today would still rather think that the Jesus of the gospels was a blip in God's personality, a mistake. God will get it right when Jesus comes again, showing the real kind of might and power. The idea that God is found in tangled, messy existence; in brokenness and despair, is unpalatable. The idea that love is higher on God's agenda than sin is even more so.

It wasn't a popular idea at the time, either. Jesus wasn't the saviour that people expected, and he wasn't the saviour they wanted. We're told that Jesus only had twelve committed followers during his life, and a few close friends. From what we can tell in the gospels, his family didn't follow him in his ministry. He certainly wasn't as family friendly as many of our present day politicians might like to suggest.

It was perhaps inevitable that Jesus would end up being crucified. If you live a life of uncompromising, courageous love then you're bound to upset any number of people. Martin Luther King, Ang Sun Suu Kyi, and Gandhi could all testify to the same thing. The biblical reports say that the Jewish leaders didn't want to deal with Jesus themselves, so they handed him over to the Roman authorities. It needs to be noted that the historicity of those accounts is highly questionable, particularly in terms of the role played by the Jewish authorities. That interpretation of the story was written

for a particular purpose and context. The sentence that Jesus was given by the Roman authorities was the form of execution designated for political rebels and defiant slaves. People were crucified when they incited rebellion against authority.

It would have been an excruciatingly painful death, but not one that was unique to Jesus. And normally that would be the end of the story.

There are diverse opinions as to why Jesus died. Some believe it was because this was the inevitable end of a life lived with such dangerous love, others believe that it was to pay the ultimate sacrifice for our sin to God. What Christians are united on is the understanding that his death wasn't the end of the story. Something happened in the days following Jesus' death that completely transformed the people who had been following him. And whether the resurrection is understood metaphorically or literally, it speaks of something remarkable, of something beyond words and imagination. It tells of life being found on the other side of death. The people who experienced it were completely, irreversibly transformed. It was a message so compelling that it couldn't be held back. Whatever happened was monumental and world-shifting - for the 2000 years since it happened, people have been living differently as a result.

For the first 300 years after Jesus died, life wasn't so good for his followers. They were obviously determined, though, and every attempt to close them down, shut them up and feed them to the lions seemed to lead only to growth and momentum. There was tumult and chaos, enough to fill tomes of history books. Things changed though, when Emperor Constantine, in 306 CE, converted to Christianity and proposed the connection of the church and the state. While it meant that Christians were no longer threatened with military might, some say that was the worst thing to happen to the Christian Church.

*We've got the American Jesus,
See him on the interstate.
We've got the American Jesus,
He helped build the President's estate.*
"American Jesus" – Bad Religion

Talkback radio buffs raged a few weeks ago about the offensiveness of a poster that was stuck onto the wall of church. 'Jesus loves Osama', it said. They were outraged that someone thought Jesus might do any such thing. I was a little shocked to think they thought he wouldn't.

It's hard to know what Jesus would make of himself today. He's become the poster boy for almost every political cause, with his image projected onto almost any manifesto. His name is used simultaneously to wage war and pray for peace; it's a tool of oppression and an inspiration for justice. With absolute confidence, people throw Jesus' teachings at each other in order to prove points of morality. It's perhaps the ultimate betrayal: Jesus has become a malleable plaything, moulded into the image of our own moral and political gods.

That's not a new thing, of course. The Jesus I grew up with was shaped by faded watercolours that adorned the walls of old Sunday School halls. You may know the kind. Jesus is sitting on a rock in a lush meadow. He has flowing golden locks and a

neatly trimmed beard. His pale skin is untouched by the sun, his bright blue eyes are looking caringly at the well scrubbed children surrounding him. They're all wearing handknitted cardigans. It's the kind of image which, when combined with carols about a baby Jesus who never cried, leaves a vague, retrospective feeling that one's been subject to some kind of Victorian behaviour management program.

It has to be asked whether 2000 years of religious photoshopping have re-modelled Jesus almost out of recognition. We've added some tints (sure, he didn't speak about homosexuality, but if he had, we know what he would have said), a blurred edge (he didn't really mean we have to sell all we have for the poor), and made him as transparent as possible (put him there in the background, but not so obvious that we actually have to look at him). The trouble is, someone forgot to hit 'save' right at the beginning, and we've got very little hope of undoing the layers to get back to the original.

Has Jesus become so much a product of our desires that it's impossible to redeem him any more? Is it possible, in the midst of the political and religious agendas and the propaganda about him to find something underneath it all that speaks of God? Millions have staked everything on the fact that there is. And many of them have lived lives that have brought peace and justice, hope and life to a world that desperately needs more of it.

Perhaps all we can do is hold lightly to the facts we can know about the historical Jesus, and instead look for where he said we would encounter God. As the stories of Jesus show us, it's rarely those in positions of power and influence who understand who God is. They – we – have too much to lose. Instead, look for what the poor, the prisoner, the women, the children would tell us of who God is, because Jesus says it's with them that God is to be found. And trust it most if they speak of love.

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Article first published in The Sunday Age, April 7 2007

