**JESUS CHRIST: BOTH COSMIC LORD AND PERSONAL FRIEND**

About two thousand years ago there was a man who had royal ancestry but who grew up in very humble surroundings. His life was spent in the service of others, but when he was thirty he and a band of his followers began to wander around the area of the Roman Empire in which they lived. They did this for about three years but their activities began to upset the authorities, so much so that they arrested the young man and crucified him. His name was…… Spartacus.

Spartacus lived about 70 BC and was the leader of the great slave uprising that led to another brutal Roman repression.

So let’s start again. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up as a general builder until he was thirty, then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, never held an office, never went to college, never appeared on TV shows, never had a presence on social media. He had no credentials but himself. But it’s clearly the case that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that have ever reigned – have not affected the life of humanity on earth as powerfully as that one solitary man.

What a life! But how do we, you and I, relate to that man Jesus Christ today? It’s not an impertinent question. It goes to the heart of why we’re here this morning, because in some way, some maybe ill-defined, curious, even mysterious way, we belong to this Jesus Christ. A Christian is a ‘Christ-person.’ A Christ-ian.

So how *would* we describe the way we relate to Jesus Christ if we had to tell someone else about it? Which, ideally, we would do when opportunity arose, because one of our callings as Christians is to invite people to look at Jesus.

Broadly we could answer in two ways. We could come at our relationship with Christ from the top down, saying that we see him as the creed says, ‘God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, by whom all things were made.’ Which is pretty breath-taking stuff, you have to admit. Think about it next time you say those words, in just a few minutes.

The other way of relating to Jesus Christ is in friendship with the man who *lived* God among us, who lived fast and died young, who came bursting with love so that the poorest were put back on their feet, the meanest given back their dignity, and who was so full of life that people around him just had to get healed. This was the Jesus who was so perfectly human that his followers saw him as divine.

So two ends of the spectrum of relating to Jesus Christ, top down or bottom up. Which way do you lean? And I’ll tell you the end of the sermon now: *you don’t have to choose!*

Today’s magnificent readings are very much from the first, top-down approach. One of my greatest joys as a parish priest was reading the gospel at the Christmas Midnight Communion, John 1: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, [think about that] and without him not one thing came into being [at all].’

I just loved those huge statements, full of depth and mystery and resonance. Though a member of one of my youth groups once said it sounded to him like a Monty Python sketch! I should have followed him up…

St Paul in his letter to the little church at Colossae, in modern day Turkey, wrote very similarly in today’s epistle, ‘He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, [again, think about it!] things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, all things were made through him - and for him.’

Wow! John and Paul are talking about someone who had lived only a few years previously, and whose disciples would have shared not only the open road but the washing up, who would have seen him having a wash in the morning and playing touch rugby on the beach. They would have shared jokes and stories and man-hugs. And most of them were still alive to bear witness to all this. How can they be making such vast, brain-trembling statements about this man?

The thing is, both these approaches are true, both top-down and bottom-up. And we get a hint of that from the name we often give him – Jesus Christ, Jesus the Anointed One. He was Jesus with us and Christ beyond us. Personal friend and cosmic Lord. Take your pick, or even better, take both.

At the end of the day, Jesus comes to us as he comes to us. In my case he came towards me out of the mist when I was at university and making up my own mind about many things. He came into focus and I was enthralled and fascinated. Not a pale Galilean in a long white nightie as I’d seen him before but a towering figure who made sense of the whole Christian jigsaw. I even gave up the law and the lure of money and turned to the ministry and the promise of penury, so compelling was the vision.

So how do you relate to Jesus Christ, more as Jesus or more as Christ, or both? Someone I know was in a taxi going to speak to clergy about evangelism. The taxi driver liked to talk and quickly found out what she was doing, upon which he told her of his belief that all religions were the same and the cause of most of the evil in the world. ‘What you believe is a complete load of rubbish,’ he said. On and on he went.

When they got to the conference centre the woman priest said this, ‘There are lots of reasons why I’m a Christian but the most important is that I’m irresistibly drawn to the person of Jesus. I’m drawn by who he was, the things he said and did, and the fact that he rose from the dead. That’s why I’m a follower of Jesus.’ She paid her fare and was about to get out when the taxi driver said, ‘What time do you need a ride back to the station? I’ll come and pick you up. I’d like to talk some more.’

The person of Jesus is infinitely fascinating just because he combines both cosmic Lord and personal friend. There’s enough material in the incredibly short period of time he was active (three years; we’ve been in Richmond for six already) - there’s enough material to have kept the world entranced, bewildered and curious for two thousand years.

And Jesus asks us to see him still, in the lives of each other. ‘Welcome everyone as Christ’ say the Benedictines.

So let me finally bring Jesus right down to earth. The writer Simon Parke tells this story: ‘Jesus is a fat man with a mobile phone. I know. Because I saw him. He got out of the community transport bus, slightly breathless, helped the old lady out, and walked her slowly towards her front door. She fumbled for her keys with shaking hands that once were young but now were old, which once attracted, but now repelled. ‘See you tomorrow, Maud,’ said the fat man. ‘See you tomorrow, love.’

Simon Parkes ended, ‘Well, if it wasn’t Jesus, it was someone very like him.’

Can we become like Jesus?

It’s a parable. In *his* parables Jesus said, ‘Do you want to know what the Kingdom of God is like? Let me tell you a story.’ In Jesus, God says, ‘Do you want to know what *I* am like? Let me ***be*** a story for you, the story of Jesus.’ Jesus is the parable of God.

Top down, bottom up, or both.