

Jesus Christ: What to Make of Him Today?

What to make of Jesus Christ today? He still figures importantly in the lives of many who have grown up in a Christian tradition, even if they can no longer accept all the church's doctrines. This *Sofia* begins with five responses. Though they agree in rejecting fundamentalism, four of them each offer their own distinct approach, and a fifth reports on another.

In his *Landmarks at Sea* Philip Smith focuses on the kingdom of Heaven, sought in a voyage or quest. He says: 'It's a metaphor of course. It is a physical place, the place of justice and peace we should be striving for on our planet. The Bible says a lot about this – more than it speaks of a life beyond death.' However: 'Alas, we know 2000 years later that righteousness and peace are as far away as ever in the world...' and 'we need to look at our goals and not at our past if we seek to reach the peaceable kingdom of God.'

Edward Walker draws on Jungian psychology to see Jesus (as well as the Buddha) as a fully achieved human being, a symbol – which can be a model for us – 'of one who had lived his life to the utmost, who had responded wholly to the vocation to which every human being is called'.

Adrian Alker, Chair of the PCN and a Church of England minister for 37 years, calls for a new Reformation which, he says, the established church 'stubbornly refuses to engage in'. Many people today describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' and religion should be 'not so much about belief but about practice'.

Mark Dyer, writing as 'a relative newcomer to SOF', asks whether there is a place in the Network for those who oppose fundamentalism but do not abandon supernatural claims. He says so far we have clearly failed to bring about a reign of kindness on Earth and need some supernatural assistance.

With the *Loughborough Echo's* kind permission we reprint its report on David Paterson's return to Loughborough, *Still Wanting to Change the World at 82*. It was in Loughborough, where he was vicar of St Peter's Church, that Paterson and a few like-minded others founded the SOF Network in the 1980s. Paterson says: 'I realised from the age of 18 that there could not be a "God" that existed. There is no "great Daddy" looking after us.' But he remains a Church of England minister with his focus firmly on the reign of justice and peace on Earth. Determined not to go quietly, he says: 'I will continue to campaign against austerity, capitalism, greed, violence...'

If we regard God and the Christ Epic as creations of the human poetic genius, as myths, Jesus can't really be God because God is not real. But in the myth he is. Myths are poetic creations but if we approach them with 'the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith', knowing that is what we are doing, they still matter tremendously and we retain a very rich resource. Thus, for example, we can celebrate the dramas of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost – indeed, the Eucharist itself – with all their wealth of liturgy, music and treasures of wisdom. Then religion is not reduced to ethics, but embraces a fuller humanity, for which poetry and art are necessary as well as kindness. If the church today 'came out' and admitted that supernatural stories are poetic creations *and* that poetry and myth are vital to us, it could still keep the feasts in good faith. Joyfully acknowledged poetic faith beats troubled half-belief or fundamentalist cognitive dissonance.

If you discard the Christ Epic as an 'accretion' but, wanting to hang on to what you can of your tradition, become a 'Jesusian' rather than a 'Christian' humanist, then there is pressure to idealise the man Jesus. I don't think Jesus was perfect. Particularly in Matthew's gospel, he seems rather keen on Hell fire. And in all the gospels, apart from his (perhaps fictional) words on the cross, in every encounter between Jesus and his mother he is offhand or rude to her and even publicly rejects her and the rest of his family. This may remind parents of having to deal with a brattish teenager. I remember when my younger daughter was 14, she and her friends started going on the non-stop picket of the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square for the release of Mandela, and staying out very late at night (in days of no mobile phones). When I said I thought she should not stay out so late on a school night, she replied haughtily: 'Mum, don't you want Mandela to be free?'

Lastly, is there a contrast between 'being spiritual' and 'showing spirit'? Jesus was not meek and mild. As Blake says in his *Everlasting Gospel*, part of which is reprinted on page 6, 'If he'd been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus, he'd have done anything to please us...' This *Sofia's* back cover shows him in a fury in El Greco's *Christ Driving the Money-Changers out of the Temple* (probably the last straw for those seeking his death). And on page 5 Verrocchio and his pupil Leonardo's painting of Jesus' baptism shows him as a gorgeous hunk, which makes one have every sympathy with Mary Magdalene wanting to grab him in the garden on Easter day.