

“BE PREPARED”

1 Peter 3:8-22

What does it mean to be a Christian? What's Christianity all about? That's the kind of question that can often come at us from friends, family, colleagues when they discover that we are followers of Jesus Christ. And everyone has their own ideas about the answer. For many people it just means being nice. Douglas Adams, near the beginning of his legendary *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, writes about it like this: “*One Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change ...*” Others may think of Christianity as being some kind of protest movement – some Christians are always protesting against things, signing petitions, stopping other people having fun. When I was doing some stuff on Victorian non-conformity at college, I came across a definition of Baptists as “*people who are against things*”! The programme by Louis Theroux that aired on the BBC last weekend will have reinforced that idea in the minds of many people. For others Christianity is simply one way amongst all others, another way of keeping happy and having something to look forward to if you believe there's more after this life's over. And, of course, for the likes of the atheist fundamentalists like Dawkins, Hitchens and company, it's the root of all evil, the cause of all wars and the reason for such a mixed-up world. I wonder how you reply – if you do – when you're asked.

In the short passage we've just read from the letter which Peter, the rock on whom Jesus Christ was going to build his church, wrote to the beleaguered early Christians scattered around the Mediterranean towards the end of the first century, we read of three things which are at the heart of our faith, three things which together give a kind of definition to Christianity, three non-negotiable things that are unique to our beliefs and which, therefore, apply to no other religion. They also provide a kind of potted response to people who ask what it's all about. Of course, they also raise other questions which are answered in other places in the Bible and in our own experience, but it's a good place to start – and that's what we're going to focus on this morning.

1. CHRIST IS LORD

In *v14*, Peter quotes from *Isaiah 8:12*. That passage in the Old Testament goes on to remind God's people that their God is Lord over all, and it seems that Peter is consciously borrowing that language in *v15* and applying it to Jesus here. But the context of Isaiah's words, and the thinking behind Peter's reference is that Jesus Christ is not only identified with God Almighty in this, but he is to be Lord over all – not just over our hearts. Christians believe in the Lordship of Christ. He is in charge. He is the almighty, ever-present, all-knowing God in whom we put our faith and to whom we owe total allegiance. That's where Christianity has to start – with Christ, from whom it takes its name.

The Old Testament is bursting with references to God being the Lord of all, but there's plenty in the New Testament about the way in which Jesus Christ also reflects that. Even in his humanity, Jesus expresses something of that omnipotent, omniscient, irresistible Lordship of God. Think of the stories in the gospels where we read of him confronting demons, stilling storms, healing diseases, unsettling powerful leaders, challenging power structures and speaking with unmistakeable authority. And there are his words to his disciples in *John 13:13* – “*You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so.*” Or what Paul has to say about him in *1 Corinthians 8:5,6* or *Philippians 2:9*. As we recognise that Jesus Christ is Lord of all things, so we must acknowledge him as Lord in our own lives.

In other words, Christianity is about acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus and believing in his utter uniqueness. The centrality of that to our faith is underlined by our taking his name for ourselves, a name that was originally meant as something of a taunt, but is now the proud badge of all those who seek to follow his ways. To call yourself a Christian means not just that you try to be nice to people or that you follow the teachings of Jesus as far as you are able or that you go to a Christian church from time to time.

It means that your whole life is submitted to him and under his authority and his guidance every minute of every day.

2. CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS

But this Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe and Lord of our lives, is also an expression of the infinite love of God. Peter reminds his readers that “*Christ died for our sins*”. This almighty God came into our world to put right the wrongs that we had been perpetrating on each other and on God’s good creation pretty well since the beginning of time. The choices and decisions that human beings had made were motivated – are motivated – more by selfishness and disobedience than by anything else. At the root of it all is a deep-seated rebellion against God which has affected all humanity. We think we know best and we think that we can sort things out, but our attempts to make the most of our lives and the most of the world in which we have been placed are inevitably affected by our own short-term selfish motives.

That state of affairs – what the Bible calls “sin” – has led to our being alienated from God and that sense of alienation has fostered within us a deep dissatisfaction with life and a profound anxiety about our eternal future. Most of us probably wouldn’t articulate it like that – we’d say we don’t really have any peace about things or we’re worried about dying or we never feel really fulfilled – but that’s what it boils down to. And Jesus came into our world to do something about that state of affairs. He modelled in his own life what it means to follow God’s way, to live as a citizen of his Kingdom. He taught us through parables and poetry and preaching how we should respond to God’s words. And when that really didn’t bring about the transformation that was necessary in the hearts of men and women, he went to the cross and died, taking on himself in a moment of infinite agony and incomprehensible love, the consequences of all our wrong choices, wrong decisions, wrong attitudes. As Peter sums it up in those five words which are the very heart of our gospel message, “*Christ died for our sins*”. And he goes on to explain briefly what that’s all about.

a) “Once for all”

Jesus died once. There’s no need to keep on sacrificing him, no need to look for other alternatives, other expressions of God’s love. When Jesus died, that was it. The forces of evil were defeated. The hold of sin on the lives of men and women was decisively broken. There was once more a choice for us, an alternative way to live, the freedom to say no to sin. This was the turning point in human history, the definitive event in the life of this world. Through this event God was giving us hope – hope for now and hope for ever. We don’t need to worry any more that our lives are unfulfilled, that our eternal future is uncertain. By looking back to that first Good Friday, back to the image of Jesus dying on a wooden cross on the hill called Skull, back to that cataclysmic afternoon of passion and purpose, we can know that it’s OK. We can be sure that our sins are dealt with.

b) “The righteous for the unrighteous”

Jesus Christ was entirely untainted by sin. His obedience to his Father was complete. He was righteous in everything he did. There seemed to be no reason for him to die. He was innocent of *any* crime, let alone the crimes for which he was tried and executed. The only reason for him to die was that he was part of God’s plan, hatched in eternity, to provide a way of making humanity righteous and able once again to enjoy the relationship of love and friendship with God that he had originally intended. We couldn’t do anything about it. We were, as the old hymn puts it, “*lost in trespasses and sin*”. But God – the God of unimaginable, incomprehensible love – had other ideas. Paul writes, “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Jesus – perfect, powerful, passionate – showed God’s love in action by dying for the likes of you and me – imperfect, frail, vulnerable, sinful human beings. No other religion, no other faith is focussed on a God who died for all people, who sacrificed himself to reconcile humanity to himself and to the cosmos.

c) **“To bring you to God”**

As we’ve already said, this is the heart of it all. Created by a good God to share in his purposes for all creation, humanity rebelled, arrogantly and mistakenly believing we could do it better on our own and in the process becoming cut off from the God who made us and loved us. God wanted us back, he wanted that relationship healed. God reached out – his initiative, not ours – to welcome us back to his side, to enable us once again to converse with him, to enjoy his love and experience his friendship, to live as he shows us in order to get the very best out of life. Christians are those who are once again at peace with God, not opposed to him or scared of him, people who are (as we reflected last week) safe under the shadow of his wings.

3. **CHRIST MADE ALIVE**

And there’s more. Christianity is a religion, a way of life, an attitude of mind of those who willingly accept the lordship of Jesus Christ, but that is not the Lordship of a dead God, of someone who did all the business by dying and that’s that.

a) **Easter – time of resurrection**

Jesus Christ was made alive again, brought back to life by the Father, taken through death and out the other side to a brilliant new resurrection life. That’s what Easter is all about. In a fortnight’s time we will be trying our best to celebrate this amazing fact from under mounds of chocolate eggs, cartoon bunnies and golden daffodils – and probably struggling to bring some kind of Christian meaning to such symbols of paganism and consumerism. But here’s the thing – Jesus is alive! Jesus has gone through death and out the other side blazing a trail for us to follow. We’re all going to die – there no doubt about that: that’s as certain and predictable as taxes and complaining letters to *The Mercury*. But those who follow the way of Jesus Christ, those who stick to the way that he has set out for us, those who submit to his Lordship and gratefully acknowledge his death on their behalf, they will go through death and experience the eternal joy of resurrection in God’s renewed creation.

b) **Seated at God’s right hand**

This is where the Lordship bit comes in again. There are those who see the death of Jesus as little more than an example, a demonstration of the ultimate in human sacrifice by which we are all intended to be inspired. It was something we could aspire to and a new way of living and loving. But ultimately, Jesus just died. I don’t want to follow a person like that. The cross then becomes an empty gesture, and example that no-one can ever really live up to. Jesus is just another failed idealist and certainly not worthy to be worshipped as Lord. Peter tells us here (v22) – and Paul emphasises it in his letters – that Jesus “*has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand*”. The writer of *The Letter to the Hebrews* also reminds us of that in *Hebrews 1:3* and *12:2*. Jesus is now – and for all eternity – sharing in the glory of God and, with him, exercising power. Part of that involves him, as Paul writes in *Romans 8:34*, praying for us, interceding for us. He continues to be an advocate for us in the very presence of God. He knows your needs and presents them to God the Father. That’s why we pray “in the name of Jesus Christ”.

c) **He is Lord of all**

Now we’re pretty well back where we started. Peter says that now Jesus Christ, who died and was restored to life through the Easter resurrection, has “*angels, authorities and powers in submission to him*”. Who rules this world? The dictators – Khadafy, King Faisal, Laurent Gbagbo? The supposed “good guys” – Obama, Cameron, Sarkozy? The multinationals – Coca-Cola, Johnson & Johnson, Nestle? The banks – HSBC, Citibank, Santander? The weavers of dreams and sellers of stories – Murdoch, Disney, Sony? No! None of them do, because ultimately they are all there with the permission of Jesus Christ and they will all sooner or later have to account for their actions before him. I have to confess I cannot understand why some of them – all of them, really – are allowed to wreak the havoc in this world that they so obviously are, but I trust that Jesus will one day bring them to justice. Because of what happened on the cross and on Easter Sunday morning, Jesus is Lord and they are not. That’s what Christianity is all about – a Saviour, a risen Saviour, a risen Lord.

Now, in a world which lurches from crisis to crisis, a world in which nihilism and cynicism are usually the order of the day, a world from which it often seems as if all hope has been drained, surely this message of Christianity brings us real hope. We have a hope because we believe that Jesus has put right the fundamental problem of the human condition – our sin and subsequent alienation from God – and even now, as Lord of all, is bringing things to their final resolution when we shall be able to share eternity with him in the presence of our God. It's not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die because we can start to enjoy that *now*. We can *now* know assurance for the eternal future. We can *now* know the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus helping us day by day to live fulfilled and satisfying lives serving him and serving our fellow man and women.

We have hope in the long term and the short term because, although we were unrighteous, we have been reconciled to God. We can therefore look forward to our own resurrection, to being made alive in and with Christ. And because of that, if Jesus is Lord, we can share in his victory over the power of evil – that's why Peter writes here "*Do not fear ...*" – fear is in many ways the opposite of hope.

And this hope, this certainty of our future with Jesus Christ, should then affect all we do. We live lives of assurance, of peace, of serenity and contentment. Christians are hopeful people in an often hopeless world. So we live differently from those who have no hope, we think differently, we behave differently – or we should. Peter tells us here that our hope should be obvious in our right conduct – which Jesus makes a key theme in his Sermon On The Mount (*Matthew 5:16*) – and in our transformed attitudes (back again to *Romans 12:2*). We need for nothing. We are afraid of nothing. It's not easy, living like this, but the more we get into the habit of it, the more we allow our thinking to be influenced by it, the less difficult it becomes. And this wonderful hope then becomes not only the **content** of our witness, as we share it with others, but also the **confidence** for our witness.

So when other people ask us, "So what's this Christianity business all about?" or "Why are you a Christian, then?", you can respond with confidence – confidence based both on what Peter writes here and on your own experience of starting to live out that hope-filled life. Of course, as Peter counsels here, we do that "*with gentleness and respect*" (v15) – just because we follow the Lord of all doesn't mean we become arrogant: humility of life is as important as boldness of word – but we have an answer prepared. That's at the root of what Peter writes in v15. "**Always** [he stresses] *be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have*". With the help of God's Holy Spirit and the encouragement of each other, may we be people who are filled with hope, a hope that radiates from our lives because we know that the Jesus who has died for us and who now lives at God's right hand is Lord of all and Lord of our lives, a hope that prompts others to ask us about our faith, to which we can respond with gentleness, respect and God-anointed confidence.

Housegroup notes and discussion questions on the next page.

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4. CHRIST IS LORD

Jesus Christ is Lord over all – not just over our hearts. Christians believe in the Lordship of Christ. He is the almighty, ever-present, all-knowing God in whom we put our faith and to whom we owe total allegiance. That's where Christianity has to start – with Christ, from whom it takes its name. Look at *John 13:13; 1 Corinthians 8:5,6; Philippians 2:9*. Christianity is about acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus and believing in his utter uniqueness.

5. CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS

But this Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe and Lord of our lives, is also an expression of the infinite love of God. Peter reminds his readers that "*Christ died for our sins*".

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Jesus died once. When Jesus died, that was it. The forces of evil were defeated. The hold of sin on the lives of men and women was decisively broken. We can be sure that our sins are dealt with.

e) **"The righteous for the unrighteous"**

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God wanted us back, he wanted that relationship healed. God reached out – his initiative, not ours – to welcome us back to his side. Christians are those who are once again at peace with God, safe under the shadow of his wings.

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So we can respond to questions about our faith with confidence – but also "*with gentleness and respect*" (v15). "**Always** be prepared to give an answer to **everyone** who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have". With the help of God's Holy Spirit and the encouragement of each other, we can be people who are filled with hope, a hope that radiates from our lives because we know that the Jesus who has died for us and who now lives at God's right hand is Lord of all and Lord of our lives, a hope that prompts others to ask us about our faith, to which we can respond with gentleness, respect and God-anointed confidence.

Questions for discussion

1. What different ideas have you heard about what Christianity really is? Why do people think like that?
2. What does it mean that "Christ is Lord"? How is that apparent in the world, the church, your life?
3. What do you understand by "*Christ died for our sins*"? Why is that so important to us as Christians? How do we communicate that to a world that doesn't really have an idea of sin?
4. What do you most like about Easter? Why?
5. How do you respond to those who say that Jesus is clearly not Lord because of the chaos that we see in the world around us?
6. What hope do you have? What is it based on?
7. If Jesus is Lord and we're going to spend eternity with him – and, by implication, those around us who don't believe won't be doing that – why should we speak with gentleness and respect? We're right, aren't we? – and they're wrong! Why don't we just tell them?

