

As we continue through John's gospel we come to the main section of Jesus' teaching just before he was arrested and crucified. Last week we saw how everything he did brought glory to his Father and that he was now being glorified for his faithfulness to his father's will. Today's reading contains one of the most controversial statements that Jesus is recorded as having said: John 14:6 *Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

That's a pretty arrogant claim – to be the only way. Isn't it a bit much to suggest that everyone else should give up their ways and follow his instead? I know people who profess to be Christians, for whom rejecting Jesus' claim to uniqueness is their central article of faith. The trouble is, it doesn't work. If you take Jesus off the throne, you put something or someone else on it. The idea that 'all religions lead to God' sounds democratic, but anything more than a cursory glance shows that it's not true. It's not just John's gospel that you lose if you accept that idea – it's the whole NT which insists that the one true and living God, is the God of Israel; and that the God of Israel has acted decisively, within history to bring Israel's story to its proper conclusion, and through that to rescue the world. Of course, there has been real arrogance in the way the message has been presented over the years, but the setting of this passage shows that such arrogance is a denial of the very truth it's claiming to present. The Jesus who washed their feet and told them to copy his example: the Jesus who was on his way to give his own life for them, and us, was not arrogant.

John's stated purpose in writing is that people who read his book will have enough information to be able to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. You can't get to know someone unless they reveal themselves. No one can get to know you unless you reveal yourself. And if there is a God and he wanted to reveal himself to us, what would be the best way to do that? It seems to be logical that he would reveal himself in a way that we could understand – and Jesus says that he is that way.

There is plenty of evidence that there was a person called Jesus. Some of that is from sources inside the New Testament and some is from external sources. The argument seems not to be whether he existed, but what his existence means.

We know he was fully human. He had a body, emotions, experiences. But many today would say, 'Yes, he was a human being. We know he existed. Maybe he was a great human being. Maybe he was a great religious teacher – but no more than that. To suggest he was the Son of God, to suggest he's God, that's going too far.'

So there are two parts to this argument. First part of the argument is: what did Jesus think about himself? Because if *Jesus* didn't think that he was God, that's kind of the end of the argument. And even if he did, the second part of the argument is: was he right?

So what did Jesus say about himself? The first bit of evidence here is that Jesus' teaching was centred on himself. Great religious teachers point away from themselves. They say, 'Don't look at me. Look at God.' Jesus, who personified humility, said: 'Look at *me*. Come to *me*.'

This question of ultimate meaning and purpose: what is our life about? This sort of sense of what you might call a spiritual hunger – this sense that other things don't quite satisfy: however good these things are, there's always this slight void, this sense that something is missing.

John 6:35 *'I am the bread of life.'* 'If you want that hunger satisfied, come to me.'

There's stuff in our lives that we don't like. I have stuff in my life I don't like. Jesus said: John 8:36 *If the son sets you free, you really will be free.*

Then there's all the stuff we carry around: worry, anxiety, fear, guilt. Jesus said: Matthew 11:28 *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I'll give you rest.* 'If you want peace, peace of mind, come to me.' Matthew 10:40 He said: *If you receive me, you receive God. If you welcome me, you welcome God.* John 14:9 He said: *If you have seen me, you have seen God.*

And then there were his indirect claims. Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins. He went up to people and said: **'Your sins are forgiven.'** Now, of course, if someone offends you, you can forgive them. But you can't go up to some random person and say, 'Your sins are forgiven.' When Jesus did that, the lawyers said, **'Who can forgive sins but God alone?'**

Forgiveness is at the heart of what Jesus came to do: to make forgiveness possible. It's at the heart of Christianity.

And then there were his direct claims. John 10:30-33 Jesus said this:

'I and the Father are one.' A claim tantamount to a claim to be God was blasphemy in the eyes of the people at the time, and they picked up stones to stone him.

Jesus said: *'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?'*

'We're not stoning you for any of these,' they replied, 'but for blasphemy, because you, a mere human being, claim to be God.'

It's an astonishing claim. But, of course, a claim like that needs to be tested. And really, if you think about it, there are only really three possibilities. Either it was not true and Jesus knew perfectly well it was not true, in which case he was a fraudster. Or else it was not true and he just simply didn't realise it was not true – he genuinely thought he was God – in which case he was deluded, or, we would say, insane.

But logically there is only really one other possibility, and that is that it's true. C. S. Lewis, one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century and, of course, best known as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said this:

'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He'd either be insane or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice: either this man was and is the Son of God, or else insane or something worse. But

let's not come up with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

So, second part of the argument: was he right in what he said about himself? What's the evidence to support his claims? Here's the first piece of evidence: his teaching.

The teaching of Jesus is widely acknowledged to be the greatest teaching of all time. 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Treat other people as you want to be treated. Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus' teaching has been the foundation of our entire civilisation in the West. Many of our laws were originally founded on the teaching of Jesus. We've advanced in every field of science and technology. Think how much we've advanced in the last ten years in science and technology. Yet in 2,000 years no one has ever improved on the moral teaching of Jesus. They're the greatest words ever spoken. They're the kind of words you'd expect God to speak.

So the first piece of evidence: his teaching.

Secondly, his life: what he did. I think it would have been such fun to be with Jesus: he went to a party; the wine ran out. He said, 'Go and get those jars. Fill them with bathwater and start pouring it out for the guests,' and they started pouring it out, and out came Château Lafite '45 – BC, that is!

Not just his miracles but his love for the marginalised: feeding the hungry, healing the sick and, ultimately, laying down his life for us. His character has impressed millions of people who wouldn't call themselves Christians.

And then his fulfilment of prophecy. No one else in the history of the world has had a whole collection of books written about them before they were born. Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies, twenty-nine of them in a single day. 'Well,' you might say, 'maybe he got hold of the Old Testament, he read all these prophecies and he thought, "Right, I'd better go around fulfilling all of these!"' The problem about that is the sheer number of them – and, humanly speaking, he had no control:

The exact manner of his death was prophesied. The place of his burial. His resurrection. Even the place of his birth was prophesied. You know, reading through: 'Oh, I'm supposed to be born in Bethlehem' – it's too late!

And then his conquest of death. This is the cornerstone of Christianity. It's so relevant to every single person here: because statistically speaking one in one die!

You know, the Victorians used to talk a lot about death, but they never talked about sex. We talk a lot about sex, but we don't talk about death. It's kind of just something you don't mention.

But people die nevertheless! And when you go to a funeral, and the coffin goes into the ground, it looks absolutely final. And it is – unless death has been conquered; unless when Jesus died and was buried he was raised to life. If he was, then there's hope beyond this life.

But is it just wishful thinking? It is, unless there's evidence. What is the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? First of all, his absence from the tomb. No one has ever satisfactorily explained why Jesus' body was not there the first Easter Day. People have come up with all sorts of explanations: the authorities stole the body. Well, in that case, why didn't they produce it when everyone was saying that Jesus had been seen? They couldn't.

I find this piece of evidence fascinating: that when the disciples heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead, they ran to the tomb, and when they got to the tomb, they looked in, and what they found was the grave-clothes of Jesus were still there. The only valuable thing for a robber to steal was still there. And they'd collapsed, like a caterpillar's cocoon when the butterfly has vanished. And the piece that had been around his head had been folded up and put in another place. And it says when they saw that, they believed.

So not only his absence from the tomb; then his presence with the disciples. Jesus was seen on several occasions, on one occasion by more than 500 people. They all saw him on the same occasion. People say 'hallucination': hallucination does occur amongst highly-strung, highly imaginative, very nervous people or people who are sick or on drugs. The disciples don't fit any of those categories. They were cynics, like Thomas. They were tough fisherman. They were tax collectors – tax collectors do not hallucinate!

And then there was the transformation of the disciples. Here was a group of people depressed, disillusioned, and suddenly they're going around saying 'We've seen Jesus! He really is alive!'

Most of the disciples died pretty horrific deaths as a result of their beliefs: they were crucified, they were beheaded, they were tortured. And all they had to say was: 'No, no, no, no, actually it's not true. We didn't really see him.' But they didn't. Those people would not have died for something they would have known was not true. But they knew it *was* true, because they'd seen the risen Jesus.

And as a result this movement – it's a movement without precedent in the history of the world – swept the whole known world, and it has no parallel. And it's still happening. You know, there are almost 3 billion Christians in the world today, of every ethnicity, every continent, every nationality, every economic, social and intellectual background.

So when we look at what Jesus claimed about himself – the first part of the argument – it's clear that Jesus did claim to be a man whose identity was God. Was he deluded? Was he a fraud? When you look at – when *I* look at ***the evidence of his teaching, the things that he did, his character, his fulfilment of prophecy, his resurrection***, it seems to me absurd, illogical, unbelievable to say he was insane or a fraud. On the other hand, it provides the strongest possible supporting evidence that what Jesus said about himself was true.

And my experience is that rather than being some kind of dramatic and exciting change, for me it has been a long, often slow, process of learning that when Jesus said '**I have come that you might have life and have it in all its fullness**', that's what he meant. My life has been changed because I believe in Jesus. I believe he really is the truth and the life, and THE way to heaven.

Of course it's not always easy. Of course there are ups and downs. Of course I mess up. But I've found that it really is true! Jesus really is who he claimed to be. Jesus really did rise from the dead. There really is hope beyond this life! And this encounter has totally changed my life.