

What is Christianity?



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Chapter One

UNITED AND DIVIDED

Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, is at the centre of Christianity. This, at least, is clear but beyond this defining the essence of Christianity is full of difficulties. It is like trying to capture a rainbow or the light from the sparkling drops of a waterfall as they reflect the sun. Christianity has many facets and many forms. It is the largest religion in the world with over a billion adherents and these are found in every country in the globe. Yet Christians are united and also divided. They are united around the centrality of the person of Jesus and His unique status and the extraordinary message He came to convey but divided in many ways on the nature of the message, on doctrine, beliefs, ethics, dress codes and even the status of the New Testament.

It would be easy to focus on the lack of unity in Christianity – and this lack of unity certainly exists. Major Christian churches are often at loggerheads and the disagreement between Christian groups can be profound and deep. Some Protestants do not regard Catholics as Christian at all. The teaching authority of the Catholic Church, the Magisterium, has traditionally been hostile to Protestantism and has denied salvation to those who were outside their own Church – indeed they ruled that there was only one Church, their own. Black Pentecostal Churches own much to the charisma of individual church leaders and there is little unity. Orthodox Christians have traditionally been suspicious of western Christianity whilst liberal Christians in the West have often

diluted traditional Christian beliefs to such an extent that not much remains.

The history of Christianity has been full of disagreements with so called 'heretical' groups being persecuted because of their deviance from what was accepted as Orthodoxy. There was no unity in the early centuries of Christianity with a considerable range of different interpretations and belief. Forging unity and then seeking to maintain this has also been a challenge within Christianity and it has occupied particularly the main Christian Churches. There has been violence, torture and persecution as well as fierce attacks over what may seem as small points of doctrine. It would be easy to reject the whole of Christianity on these grounds and many critics have done so.

Yet, beneath the tensions and the sometimes violent disagreements, like the deep '*dei profundis*' or the deep tone of a base bell, there is something profound, significant and important happening – something of enormous contemporary relevance and something on which hundreds of millions of people down the centuries have been willing to stake their lives. Christianity has been responsible for some of the greatest art, the greatest acts of heroism and altruism, as well as compassion, nobility and virtue – as well as, it must be admitted, terrible persecution and suffering. Christian thinkers have generated some of the most profound philosophy as well as science and business practice. European culture has been founded on Christianity and has been exported around the globe and many of the internationally accepted values endorsed by the United Nations have Christian origins.

To understand Jesus of Nazareth it is important to understand the culture in which he lived. The Roman Empire two thousand years

ago covered most of central and southern Europe as well as north Africa. Its armies were dominant and its civilian administration harsh and unyielding – but also reasonably fair as well as viciously cruel to those who dissented. Being a Roman Citizen carried great privileges and most of the inhabitants of the territories that Rome conquered longed to share in the wealth, power and prosperity of the empire. Slaves were common and accepted – these often came from the nations conquered by Rome in battle but slaves could rise to positions of influence. Most, however, were desperately poor and appallingly treated. Society was clearly hierarchical with the great families of Rome at the top. Money was of central importance as in most societies and a certain amount of social mobility was possible, but always within fairly narrow limits. Any resistance to the Imperial power of Rome was suppressed viciously and effectively.

The Roman Senate and the Emperor had ultimate power but this was delegated to administrators and officials in the various territories of the empire. However, these officials all recognised that they were fully accountable to Rome for keeping order, for sending taxes back to Rome and also for ensuring that Roman values and Roman religion was maintained. Rome had its own pantheon of gods and emperors were sometimes deified. The Jews held a special position as their religion was tolerated. Rome occupied Palestine and what had been, in the remote past, independent Jewish territory. Unlike many subservient peoples, the Jews were proud and continually dreamed of regaining their freedom. Their lands had been frequently conquered in the past but, eventually, they had always regained their independence and at the time of Jesus there were many who dreamed that this independence would come again.

Jesus was a Jew and this culture was second nature to him. Jews were the first monotheists – the first to worship a single God. Jews were proud of their identity and their religion. The Roman authorities left them free to practice their religion provided they obeyed the laws of Rome and paid the very considerable taxes that were demanded of them. The Temple in Jerusalem had recently been rebuilt and continued to be used as a Temple, but Rome asserted its domination by occupying one of the corner towers. Rome had little time for Jewish religion and practices but they were tolerated not out of sympathy but as the easiest way of keeping a potential troublesome people quiet. There was a vassal king who was allowed a limited degree of autonomy and the Jewish priests were also allowed a certain amount of freedom to manage religious affairs.

In understanding any period in history the culture context is important and this is undoubtedly the case when seeking to understand Jesus of Nazareth. In the case of Jesus, however, his national background was even more important than with almost any other historical figure. To say that he was a Jew does not begin to capture what this meant – the depth of culture, theology, civilisation, expectations, disappointments, resentments and hope that lay behind this single word were massive. Jews, more than almost any other nation, are a people with a long history. They saw history as the arena in which their god, the God of the whole creation, cared for and looked after them in spite of great suffering. Jews saw themselves – and still do – as a people chosen by God, the chosen people who God would always protect and, in the last analysis, preserve. This hope and expectation has always been born out. The other nations and sects of the ancient middle east have all disappeared – the

Moabites and Assyrians, the Philistines and the Babylonians, the Romans and Greek have all been swept away to be replaced by nation states with changing boundaries and identities. However Jewish identity has been preserved.

In order, therefore, to begin to understand the person of Jesus of Nazareth it is essential to understand something of Jewish history – or at least history as it was seen by the Jews and recorded in the Torah and other books which Christians refer to as the Hebrew Scriptures. These scriptures tell the story of the history of a people and their interaction with their God – of their origins, their faith, their failures, their hopes and disappointments. Modern scholars differ about the extent to which this story is true – but there is no doubt that it was considered as true by Jews at the time of Jesus and, indeed, by many Jews and Christians today. In the next chapter a very brief account will be given of this history and this is not mere background. It is not possible to understand what Christianity is until one has understood that Jesus was a Jew and he was seen as a fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures. Jesus, Christians believe, is the highest point of God's love for and interaction with the world but it is no mere coincidence that He was born as a Jew. God's relation with the people of Israel goes back to the dawn of time and, as history develops and God interacts with human beings and in human affairs, it is Jesus who brings to fruition all the long history and expectation of the people of Israel.

Chapter Two

FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE UNIVERSE

Christians see the world as created by God and dependent on God. God sustains the universe in existence and, were it not for God, there would be no universe. This idea has its roots in the earliest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures where God's creative Word is held to have uttered the universe into existence. God is also shown as responsible for the sea and dry land, for all animals, birds and fish and, above all, for the creation of men and women. Men and women are the pinnacle, the crown of creation and God created a perfect world for them and was pleased with all that God had created. It was a perfect and wonderful world and human beings were placed in it to enjoy it and to enjoy God's presence. This is the beginning of the story in the Hebrew Scriptures but for modern Christians, the issues are more complex. Most Christians fully accept evolution and, whilst maintaining that God created and sustains the universe, nevertheless see human beings as evolving from lower animals. Generally Christians do not see a tension between their faith and science although there are some who hold to a literal interpretation of the text.

The story of the Jews, therefore, begins with creation. The Word of God is central to the creation story – and indeed to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the Word of God that creates the heavens and earth and it is the Word of God that later comes to the great Hebrew prophets. The God of the Hebrews is beyond all

human categories – the whole of the universe cannot contain God, and yet God is radically present among God’s chosen people. The Word of God is therefore active and creative – it is a Word for guidance, exhortation and sometimes condemnation. The Word has power and can not only create from nothing but also intervene in and through human affairs.

There are two different creation stories were written, biblical scholars generally agree, about four hundred years apart and, of course, long after the events that they seek to describe. They recount, in different ways, the universe coming into being and the presence of human beings in the world. However these stories continue with the immediate disobedience of the two figures recorded as placed in the perfect world God created – Adam and Eve. This disobedience of these two primal figures led to disruption of the world with pain, evil and suffering entering the world. The Hebrew Scriptures are in no doubt about the extraordinary position that human beings occupy in the whole created universe. They are the pinnacle, the crown of creation and essentially different from everything else in the created order because they have rationality and also free will. Essentially they are good but they are also deeply flawed and imperfect.

Obedience to the Word of God is a central theme in the Hebrew Scriptures and from the creation of the world the Scriptures record the tendency of humans to be self-centred and disobedient. This disobedience is not a matter of rejecting some autocratic power figure – God creates human beings and wants what is best for them, what will leave to human fulfilment. God gave them freedom but this freedom is constantly misused. However God also showed God’s care for them by cherishing

them and being with them in spite of their difficulties – this is another theme found throughout both Judaism and Christianity that God will never forsake God’s chosen people and will be with them even though this presence may not be obvious. The story of Adam and Eve and the population of the earth continues through the story of Noah when God is recorded as being so angry with human beings because of their selfishness and disobedience that the whole of creation was nearly destroyed – but Noah and his family and the whole of the created order were preserved as a result of the righteousness of Noah and the mercy of God. Some Jewish Rabbis have seen parallels with the subsequent righteousness of the Jews preserving the whole of creation from destruction.

The single most important figure in the Jewish scriptures is arguably Abraham. Abraham was a descendent of Noah and lived in the city of Ur in what is now Iraq. He worshipped a single God and this was unusual and unpopular in the world of his time. The legacy of Abraham was enormous. He is revered as the father not only of the Jewish nation but of all Jews, he is seen by Muslims as the first to submit to Allah and, therefore, the first Muslim and by Christians as the ‘father of faith’ as his whole life is centred on obedience to and worship of God. The story of Abraham is at the core of the faith of any Jew – and Jesus would have been no exception. The whole of Abraham’s life was based on trust in God and trust in the promises of God, even when these promises seemed absurd. He trusted God when God promised him a son even though his wife, Sarah, was past the menopause. He trusted God in every aspect of his life even to the extent of being willing to place obedience to God before his duty to his son and family. It was to Abraham and his descendents that

God is held to have made the promise of the land of Israel in Palestine and Jews still look to this promise as a justification for a Jewish homeland. Abraham was the first to show clearly the single most important requirement of the God of the people of Israel – this was that God demanded absolute loyalty. God had to be at the centre of the whole of the life of every devout Jew. Everything else was to be put in second place. It is failure to keep this command that Jews saw as the chief reason for the troubles that were to befall them in their history.

God entered into a Covenant, effectively a binding promise, between God on one side and Abraham and his descendents on the other. Provided the children of Abraham maintained loyalty to God, then God would protect them. God would never abandon them totally even though at times God might be far away.

Abraham had two children – one by Sarah’s slave Hagar (at the request of Sarah when she was convinced that she was barren and could not have children) and the other by Sarah herself. The second child was named Isaac (which means laughter) and it was from Isaac and one of his two sons, Jacob that all the tribes of Israel were seen as descended. Blaise Pascal referred to the *‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob not the god of the philosophers’*. He was emphasising the personal nature of God and the relationship that God is recorded as having with these three great ancestors of the Jewish nation and which he considered continued in the Christian tradition. It is important to recognise that the people of Israel and modern Jews see themselves descended from Abraham through Isaac and then Jacob – there is a real sense, therefore, that the people of Israel were a great extended family. Jews, therefore, were concerned with their lineal descendents –

parents mattered. Jews tended to marry Jews and Jewish identity was maintained by dietary laws and by various practices including the removal of the foreskin from the penis of baby boys (circumcision). Jewish identity has always been a key feature in maintaining the existence of the people of Israel and these outward signs were seen as acknowledgement of this dependence.

The Hebrew Scriptures record the story of the people of Israel who were, at this early stage, merely a group of families descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons from two wives and these twelve sons were to give their names to what were to become the twelve tribes of Israel. The extended family faced starvation and famine in Palestine where the rains are often uncertain and, after years of drought, they were forced to flee to the land of Egypt which, because of the river Nile, has always been an area of prosperity.

The adventures and events which gave rise to this Exodus are related in detail but God's hand is always seen as working through history. At the time, isolated and seemingly unrelated events occur but behind these events is God's guidance of history and bringing God's purposes about. History is not a mere series of events still less is it simply based on decisions made by human beings. For Jews, God's hand lies behind the whole of human history and it was God's hand who took the fledgling people of Israel (no more than a group of related families) into Egypt. Once there, the group of wandering families settled and grew prosperous, only to find a new ruler emerging and they were seen as immigrants and resented. Their numbers increased, however, but they were made into slaves and their lot was a

miserable and unhappy one. Still the scriptures record God as being with them and they maintained their faith – hoping against all expectation for deliverance.

This eventually comes with the extraordinary story of Moses, a Jew but raised as an Egyptian. God is recorded as taking this outsider and using him as an instrument to lead the people of Israel back to the land promised to their forefather Abraham. This is another theme constantly recorded in the Hebrew scriptures – that God does not favour and choose the strong and powerful but often works through those who are seen as weak and who are outsiders to power structures. God does not depend on human strength and ingenuity nor does God value people on the same basis as human beings. Moses is an unlikely outsider and had to stand against the might of the Egyptian ruler, the Pharaoh, but with God on his side is able to free the people of Israel.

The people of Israel fled from oppression in Egypt and later Christians who were persecuted remembered God's saving hand working to save the people of Israel. Christians were to come to see themselves as 'the new Israel' and, therefore, stories of deliverance and salvation in the Hebrew Scriptures became related to Christian concerns.

Although the people of Israel successfully left Egypt, protected by the direct action of God, their lack of faith is not disguised in the Scriptures. They wandered for many years in the harsh environment of the Sinai desert and many felt initially that they would have been better to remain as slaves in Egypt. God appeared to become an absent God and having lived in Egypt they were used to the Egyptian gods that were visible - so they made an idol of a calf which they made from gold. This seemed

much more real and immediate that the remote God who appeared to have deserted them and left them to be wandering nomads. In other words they lose faith – they did not realise that God’s time scale was not theirs. The Hebrew Scriptures are frank in recognising the continuance disobedience of the people of Israel – but always God remains faithful. So it proves in this story and after many years of hardship and wandering in the desert during which they numbers increased still further, they were eventually led back to where they considered home, the land they believed to have been promised them by God through God’s promise to Abraham.

It was on the way out of Egypt that God is recorded as giving the people of Israel the Ten Commandments which are the corner stone of Jewish law – although this law is amplified by many other commands given by God over the centuries. They eventually arrived back in Palestine only to find it peacefully settled with strong and powerful cities and their presence was resented and opposed – the locals certainly did not recognise any rights of this strange and alien people. However the people of Israel had been through great hardship and they maintained their unity, moulding themselves into a formidable fighting force and conquering, in a series of wars, much of the land that was to become Israel.

The new land of Israel was divided between twelve tribes – representing the twelve sons of Jacob. They were surrounded by neighbours who wished to destroy it and the identity of the people of Israel was under constant threat. Only in loyalty to God, they believed, could their identity be safeguarded and the Hebrew stories contain myriad accounts of men and women and

the whole nation being preserved by God in times of crisis when all hope seems to be at an end. Indeed the preservation of hope and trust when all the evidence runs in the opposite direction is another feature of the Hebrew Scriptures. This hope was for this world – not for any idea of a life after death. The idea of life after death was a late and disputed idea in Judaism. The prime focus is on the richness of life here and now and the Scriptures include many stories of the joy of family life, of the passion of being in love and the positive side of the world – all stemming from the goodness of God. However the dark side is always present as well and it is only through obedience and loyalty of God’s covenant that hope can be maintained and goodness can triumph.

There is no single piece of territory that can be described as ancient Israel - the borders were fluid and changed over time. When the people of Israel came out of Egypt they described this as an Exodus and Jews saw themselves as ‘coming home’ to their forefather’s land. During this time they were led by a series of great leaders or Judges (one of them a woman). The tribes of Israel remain their own identity living in different areas and, initially they avoided the cities. Yet the Judges could call them together in time of war to unite against what was seen as a military threat.

The prophets have a vital role to play in understanding Jewish history. They were often lonely and isolated figures, harsh and unyielding and often resented by those in power. However they continually spoke up in the name of God standing for justice and goodness in the face of power and corruption. Above all, they stood for the necessity for God to have a central place in the life of the Jewish state and for high moral standards as well as

concern for those who were weak and vulnerable. The prophets did not speak on their own authority. The Word of God came to them and they were, effectively, the mouthpieces of God – sometimes speaking with reluctance because they often faced death or persecution from those in power. However the reality of God’s Word to them was so great that it was almost impossible to resist.

The prophets, however, could also be wrong – the story of Jonah is the story of an insular prophet, obsessed with the rightness of the people of Israel and the wrongness of everyone else and convinced that God favoured only Israel. The whole book is a wonderful story to make very clear that whilst God was the God of Israel, God is also the God of the whole world and that good and righteous people are to be found beyond Israel’s borders. Jonah is forced to recognise this uncomfortable truth. Never, except in the early days, did the people of Israel see their God as one amongst a number of local gods. They were convinced that the whole created order depended on God alone and that all other gods were merely human creations with no significance or power at all.

Initially the people of Israel were wanderers. Abraham and his descendents would have been like modern Bedouin and even when they came with their extended families into Palestine after leaving Egypt they were essentially a tribal and pastoral people. Settling into cities came later. There was suspicion not only of a king but of any central capital and even of a temple. Their God was an invisible God, the Lord of the whole earth and no human made building could contain God. What was more, the Ten Commandments had specifically forbidden any representation to

be made of God so no statues or other idols were made. The people of Israel could not even utter the name of God and one of the Ten Commandments specifically condemned taking the name of God in vain. The result was that the nearest thing to a temple was a travelling 'ark' or tent which was seen as the symbol of holiness and the dwelling place of God on earth.

In these years there was suspicion of any idea of having a king as it was felt that only God could be the Lord and Master of Israel. Religiously, therefore, the idea of having a king was treated with suspicion. However political and military expediency made the choice of a King necessary and three great Kings unified and, in the case of two of them extended the national borders – first Saul, then David (the greatest king of all who was also a musician and a poet and who ruled over the kingdom of Israel at the time of its broadest extent) and finally Solomon. It was during David's reign the modern Biblical scholars argue that the story of Abraham was written down and the boundaries of David's kingdom coincide closely with the land promised by God to Abraham – but it was only for a very short period that Israel actually controlled these territories.

The choice of a king was not seen as a matter of expediency or the most powerful coming to power – God was seen as choosing a king and often the choice was unlikely and improbable. The first king, Saul, was an unlikely choice and was chosen by Samuel, one of God's prophets, to whom the Word of God had come. Saul was in many ways a good king but as grew increasingly self-centred and no longer placed God and God's command at the centre of the life of the nation. He also became increasingly jealous of a young boy, David, who slew in individual combat one of the most

powerful champions of a neighbour tribe with whom the people of Israel were at war – Goliath. David developed into a brave and fearless soldier and was the closest friend on Saul’s son, Jonathan. He was good looking, young, a fine musician and ordinary people looked to him in admiration. Saul’s anger grew and eventually open enmity broke out between King Saul and David who had become one of his strongest generals. David is recorded as having to flee for his life. Eventually Saul dies by the intervention of God and David takes over. This whole saga is recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures in very human terms but God’s hand lies behind the whole of history and King David was to become the greatest of all the Kings of Israel.

When he was young, David was a mere shepherd boy with no lineage or power base – and yet it was he who was chosen by God to succeed Saul. It is important to understand that Israel did not see themselves as simply another state who happened to worship God. God was at the centre of their whole life and self-understanding. The debate over whether or not to have a king and even which king to choose was always couched in theological terms. David did not feel that he was worthy to build a temple for God and this task fell to Solomon, David’s son. Solomon was revered for his wisdom and wealth but lost some of his father David’s kingdom and from then on the State of Israel began to contract – splitting into two to form a northern and a southern kingdom. All the time, the scriptures see God’s hand behind these developments and God, through the prophets who spoke in God’s name, directing the people and maintaining unity in the face of constant outwards threats.

Once a King was appointed then a settled capital city followed close behind and so did the idea of a Temple. It was King David's son, Solomon, who is recorded as building the first Temple – a magnificent building only made possible by the wealth that Solomon had accumulated following the death of his father, David.

King Solomon has many wives and many of these were not Israelis – the problem was not multiple wives but that these wives brought with them worship of foreign gods. This practice continued and increased after Solomon's death and, under King Ahab, the worship of the God of Israel had almost disappeared or, at the least, was under grave threat. There were few genuine prophets left – but one of them was Elijah, one of the greatest of all the prophets. King Ahab had married a foreign wife, Jezebel, who had extended the worship of foreign gods into Israel. There were over 400 priests of this new God, and the god of Israel was increasingly ignored. Elijah issued a challenge to the priests of Jezebel's God – they were both to take two bullocks and to make two altars. Then the priests of Jezebel's god were to call down fire from heaven calling on their god. This they did dancing round the sacrifice all day and cutting themselves whilst praying to their god – but nothing happened. Elijah mocked them saying *'Perhaps he is sleeping - you need to shout louder to wake him up!'* but still there was no response. Finally Elijah comes forward to the altar he had built. He had water poured over his sacrifice and then calls to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Fire descends from heaven and the sacrifice is consumed. Elijah has all the priests of the foreign god put to death. Jezebel, however, is furious and vows to kill Elijah.

Elijah has to flee for his life because the remaining priests of the other gods wanted to destroy him. God eventually comes to Elijah and tells him to stand on the mountain side. First a great wind came that tore at the mountains – but the Lord was not in the wind. Then came an enormous earthquake – but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Then came a great fire – but the Lord was not in the fire. Finally there was a still small voice asking Elijah “What are you doing here”. Alone, hungry, and isolated, Elijah feels it is all hopeless. He replies:

“I have been very jealous for the Lord, the god of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down they altars and slain they prophets with the sword, and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to destroy it.”

Effectively the people of Israel have abandoned their God and Elijah is hiding in fear of being murdered. Everything seems hopeless – as it often does in the long history of the people of Israel. God tells him to anoint two new kings who God names and a new era began. This is a pattern that runs throughout Israel’s history. Israel ignores God and seems to abandon worship and obedience entirely – but a small remnant remains faithful and rekindle once more worship and praise of the one true God. The Hebrew Scriptures are very clear about the weakness and betrayal of God by the people of Israel, but they are equally clear about God’s power, compassion and faithfulness.

After the death of Solomon there were a series of ineffective kings and the united kingdom of Israel split into northern and southern kingdoms and gradually became weaker and weaker. Warfare with neighbouring tribes or countries as well as warfare between different leaders was almost constant and the people of

Israel saw themselves depending on their God for their protection. The weakness of Israel compared to the increasing powerful neighbours that surrounded them was to culminate in possibly the most catastrophic event in Israel's history – the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Jeremiah was one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. He called the people of Israel back to loyalty to God and to placing God at the centre of their lives – but people did not listen. Like many of the prophets he was ignored and scorned and felt his own life under threat. God's Word, however, was commanding and he had to prophecy in front of the King – and the prophecy was uncomfortable. He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, the enslavement of the people of Israel and the death of the king. Not surprisingly, hardly anyone believed him. Jeremiah had no doubt that the prophecy would come true – although he also had hope for the future. He bought a field to show his confidence that, one day, the people of Israel would be able to return after the destruction that he had foretold as imminent.

The Hebrew Scriptures see the Babylonians as agents of God punishing the people of Israel for their wickedness. They lost everything. Their identity was founded on three things: Temple, King and Land. All these were destroyed. The King was killed, the Temple pulled down and the leading figures among the people of Israel were taken off into captivity. It should have been the end of the Israelites - one more little nation vanquished by a regional power and disappearing from the pages of history. That they did not do so was due to their faith in God and also their memory of another exile – when they were in Egypt. They maintained their identity in Babylon, showing loyalty and service to the Babylonian state but insisting on maintaining their religious identity, not

inter-marrying and above all maintaining their faith that God would deliver them and bring them back to their homeland. What was even more important was that they came to a startling new understanding of their relationship with God – being faithful to God did not depend on having a temple, or a king or occupying a particular piece of land. It depended, rather, on inner loyalty to the covenant established between God and the people of Israel. They would not eat pork or work on the Saturday (the seventh day of the week in the Jewish calendar which God had commanded as a rest day). Above all they would not worship other Gods and the Hebrew Scriptures tell stories of incredible bravery with people going to their death rather than breaking God's command. Loyalty to the covenant with God and to God's commands as being central rather than worship in a particular building was a startling and new idea and was eventually to make it possible for Jewish communities to flourish in any society, maintaining their identity and religious practices and yet otherwise being loyal to the state.

Eventually, after many years in Babylon, the Israelites were allowed to return and immediately started building the walls around Jerusalem and also re-building the Temple. In spite of their realisation whilst in Babylon that land and Temple were not essential, nevertheless these ideas were and are deeply rooted in the Jewish psyche and returning to their homeland was a powerful symbol. In the centuries that followed the armies of a number of empires swept over the small land of Palestine and Israel did not regain full independence – although still the dream remained. The conquering armies tried many alternative plans to stamp out and destroy Jewish practices, identity and worship but none of them succeeded. Jewish armies were raised and

destroyed and the inexorable forces of the mightiest armies of the world crushed whatever military power Israel managed to assemble – and yet still the identity of the people of Israel remained. In the process tens of thousands of young men from Israel died convinced that they were fighting for their God and that God would deliver them. All these empires had conquered, destroyed and absorbed many local peoples but the identity of the people of Israel remained intact. The latest empire to control Palestine was that of Rome and it was, therefore, under the control of the Roman imperial power that Jesus grew up.

In the time of Jesus there were Zealots who dreamed of independence and establishing a new, independent kingdom of Israel. They looked back to the great glory days of King David and believed that God would be on their side in an attempt to drive out the Roman occupying power. It was a foolish dream but similar foolish dreams had come to fruition before and many Jews, either secretly or not, thought back to the old days. They resented the presence of the Romans as a heathen occupying power and thought that a great leader might emerge, a new Messiah, a 'son of David' (their greatest king and military leader) or saviour of the people who would be a mighty warrior and would lead the people of Israel to independence in their own country.

Jesus, then, grew up with all these folk memories – with knowledge of the history of Israel, within a society confident in their superiority as a people chosen by God but also an oppressed and powerless people on the periphery of a great empire.

Chapter Three

THE LIFE OF JESUS

Recounting the 'Life of Jesus' is far from straightforward and takes us to the heart of the difficulty in trying to give an account of 'What is Christianity?' today. The four Gospels (sets of stories about Jesus in the New Testament) include various accounts – there are accounts of his birth, a few stories of events immediately following his birth and then accounts of his ministry and death with one account of an event when he would have been about twelve years old. However Christians are divided as to the status to give to these accounts. Some would insist that the accounts are literally true (even though there are differences between them) and others would see the accounts as conveying central truths about Him but also making significant theological points.

Whilst there may be disagreement among Christians about the details of Jesus' life there is almost no doubt at all among historians that he existed. The evidence in favour of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is actually much stronger than for most historical figures. The evidence of his message is also very strong – but the details of His life are subject to more disagreement.

Since the mid nineteenth century a great deal of academic work has been undertaken into the Gospels and scholars are now reasonably clear about the structure of the Gospels and how they came to be written. The Gospel of Mark is considered to be the

earliest – this is a bare and fairly sparse account although it contains essential elements of His teaching. There is no account of Jesus’ death or resurrection from the dead in Mark’s Gospel. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written for different audiences but they both contain most of the Gospel of Mark as well as a common source which they both share which scholars have named ‘Q’ (from the Greek word ‘Quelle’ for source). The three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as the ‘Synoptic’ gospels and they share much in common. Mark’s Gospel was probably written about 60 to 80 ad and Matthew and Luke perhaps 20 years later. Perhaps the earliest Christian records are the letters or epistles written by Paul and others after Jesus’ death – these are dated within 15 years of Jesus death and are the closest we have to a contemporary account. These give little details about Jesus’ life but they do serve to confirm many of the central theological ideas coming from the four Gospels.

The Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish audience and seeks to show Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. It therefore starts with a long genealogy or list of descendents showing that Jesus was descended from King David as it was important for Jews that the coming Saviour or Messiah should be descended from David. It also includes many references to Jesus fulfilling Jewish prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures as a way of confirming to a Jewish readership that Jesus really was the person prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. It includes, for instance, an account of his parents fleeing to Egypt and then coming back out of Egypt (so that He could be seen as the new Moses). There is no agreement among Christians about the historical accuracy of many of these accounts and it can be argued that the writer of Matthew’s gospel might have inserted

some of these as a way of confirming Jesus status. Many other Christians, however, would regard the stories as literally true. Matthew, therefore, used Mark's Gospel as a basis and then inserted material from 'Quelle' the common source shared with Luke but Matthew also added material of his own in order to provide a distinctive picture of Jesus that would appeal most clearly to a Jewish readership.

The Gospel of Luke is generally agreed to have been compiled by a Greek doctor named Luke who intended for a non-Jewish or gentile audience. This emphasises the gentleness of Jesus and His all inclusive teaching. Again Luke uses Mark's gospel and also 'Quelle' but, again, there is distinctive material that Luke brings in to provide an equally distinctive picture to appeal to a Gentile audience. It is important to understand that the picture of Jesus in both Matthew and Luke is essentially very similar (after all they share much common material) but they nevertheless provide a distinctive slant on Jesus' life and it is not surprising, therefore, that the early Church decided to retain both Gospels.

The synoptic gospels were written as historical accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Events are described, sayings are recorded and Jesus' teachings are shared with the world. The authors of the synoptic gospels wanted to show that Jesus was the Messiah of Jewish expectation and to show how He lived among people on earth. They wanted to show that Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. The nature of these prophecies is disputed among scholars but there is no doubt that the people of Israel expected a deliverer to be sent – but the general expectation was of a great warrior who would drive out the occupying power, restore the independence of

Israel as well as the Davidic kingdom. The Messiah that the Gospels portray was very different indeed from this.

The Gospel of John is in a different category. It wants to show the divinity of Jesus and, in particular, that Jesus represented the coming of God as a human being into the world. Jesus is shown as the culmination of a divine plan for the whole of creation. The Gospel of John is regarded by most scholars as much more theological and possibly, therefore, less historical. Almost all scholars agree that this is written much later than the other three Gospels – perhaps in 90 to 120 AD (Jesus died about 30AD). However there are dissenting voices to this view and some, such as the late J.A.T Robinson, argued for a much earlier dating. The general assumption is that a more theological gospel would be dated later but this is not necessarily the case. Some of the earliest Christian documents are letters or epistles written by the Apostle Paul and these are dated very early indeed and are also highly theological. However the general academic consensus is for a later dating.

One of the central themes of John's Gospel is that God's Word which was present at the creation and which came to the prophets through Israel's history became incarnate in Jesus. God's very word, effectively, took human flesh so communicate the reality of God even more immediately than ever in the past. The beginning of John's Gospel is one of the most profound expressions of Christian belief and it is worth quoting in full:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life,⁵ and

the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,⁶ full of grace and truth."

This expresses the central insight of Christianity – that the whole universe depends on the Word of God and that this Word became human, became incarnate, in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth to fully reveal God's love for human beings and to bring people into a love relationship with God. It is a profound and moving piece of theological writing and the lack of certainty about the details of Jesus' life pale into insignificance in comparison with it.

There have been a number of 'Quests for the historical Jesus' – there was an original quest (date) and a 'New Quest' (date) which brought together the finest Biblical scholars and theologians. The most that these arrived at is that no certainty is possible.

Because of disagreements about the historicity of the accounts of Jesus' life, giving an account of it is not at all easy. Some Christians would put together all the different accounts and assume that they are all historically accurate but many others would see this as far too literal an approach. Some Christians might be doubtful about being able to know anything much about Jesus' life – but this position would be rejected by other Christians who want to take the Gospel stories literally. The truth is that there is no single view in Christianity about Jesus' life. All we have are the accounts in the Gospels and the stories passed down and accepted by Christians down the centuries. How historically accurate they are is almost impossible to determine. This might seem to imply that nothing can be known with any

degree of confidence about Jesus but this is not the case – and in the next chapter when Jesus’ message is outlined this will become clear. For the moment, however, we need to give some account of Jesus’ life and this will be done by reference to the stories in the Gospels.

The Gospels record Jesus as being born of a young girl called Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Joseph was of the tribe of Benjamin and could trace his descent back to King David (something that Matthew’s gospel spells out in detail). However Joseph is not recorded in the Gospels as the natural father of Jesus. An angel is recorded in Luke’s Gospel telling her that God had chosen her to bear a son even though she had not slept with a man – and this was before she and Joseph had got married. The father of Jesus is seen not to be any human being but God. Jesus, Christians believe, is the son of God (although this was a phrase also used of the great Kings of Israel such as David, for Christians it means much more than this – that God became human in Jesus). Christians tend to praise Mary because of her faithful obedience to the command of God and see her as the crucial female example of obedience and loving service to God as well as the ideal mother.

The engaged couple, Mary and Joseph were travelling to Bethlehem in response to a requirement by the Roman Governor that everyone should return to their ancestral town to complete a census when Mary went into labour. The inns were all full and the birth took place in a stable. This is portrayed as an extraordinary and pivotal event with shepherds in the hills being visited by an angel to tell of the birth and wise philosophers or astrologers from the East of Palestine following an extraordinary

star which led them to the stable where the infant Jesus lay. Even King Herod, the vassal king who governed Israel under the Romans, was recorded as having a dream that ‘the king of the Jews’ had been born. Fearing for his crown he sent out an order that all babies under two years old should be killed to ensure that no future king survived. Jesus’ parents were warned in a dream and fled to Egypt for a short time.

There is no record of Jesus’ childhood except for one short scene when his parents took him to the Temple in Jerusalem. Surrounded by the huge crowds he became lost and Mary and Joseph searched for him. They eventually found him talking to the wisest rabbis and impressing them with his depth of understanding. The young boy Jesus, when confronted by his concerned parents expressed surprise and asked them why they did not expect Him to be about his Father’s business (clearly indicating that his father was not Joseph but God).

A tradition drew up among the early Christian church that Mary was a virgin and never slept with Joseph. There is no textual evidence for this and it was a belief intended to show Mary’s purity. The Gospels record Jesus having brothers but mainstream Christians who support the perpetual virginity of Mary say that this refers to spiritual brothers and that Mary had no other children.

Jesus’ actual ministry lasted either one or three years (The Gospels differ). What is clear is that he gathered a disparate group of close friends, followers or disciples around him. They were outsiders to the world of power and influence - a tax collector, fishermen – ordinary people whom he called to give up everything and to follow him which they did willingly. He was

clearly a charismatic person and his message of God's love and forgiveness had huge appeal. His ministry started with his baptism in the River Jordan by an extraordinary man who was about the same age as Jesus.

John the Baptist has spent years in the desert wilderness fasting and living very simply and calling for a renewal of commitment to God, demanding that people give up their complacent lives and live in a different way. He also prophesied the coming of the Messiah or Saviour. John was baptising people in the river Jordan to forgive them their sins and as a symbol of their willingness to dedicate their lives to God. Jesus went for Baptism and in one of the most significant moments recorded in the Gospels John recognises Him and declines to baptise Jesus. John understands that this is the person about whom he has been prophesying and does not consider himself worthy to carry out the baptism. Jesus insists and, in a key moment, the heavens are recorded as opening and a dove descends on Jesus whilst God's voice proclaims *"This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased"*.

The dove would have reminded readers of the Gospels of the dove that was sent out from the Ark by Noah to find dry land when the whole of the known world was engulfed in flood water. The dove has come to symbolise, in Christian theology, both peace and also the Holy Spirit which God sent down on Jesus at His baptism just as believers later are meant to receive the same Spirit at their baptism. The role of the Holy Spirit and its significance will be made clear later.

Baptism was not just a crucial event in Jesus' life, it was also a central command by Jesus recorded in the Gospels – he sent his disciples out to live simply among people, to preach the good

news that He came to bring (the word 'gospel' itself means good news) and also to baptise people. The practice of Baptism of Christians therefore became central for all Christians and this is the moment when the spirit of God is held to fall on the baptised persons and to officially make the individual part of the Christian community. The Christian practice of baptism varies. Many Churches have infant baptism when the child is baptised as a baby and welcomed into the Church. Some Christians, however, hold that baptism should be delayed until a person can make the promises for themselves to renounce evil and to hold fast to Christ whilst others practice 'full immersion' baptism – instead of a few drops of water being sprinkled on the person to be baptised, they are immersed completely in water in the way that Jesus would probably have been baptised in the River Jordan. For most Christians, baptism is the mark of the formal entry of a person into the Christian community and, as well as parents, there may be so called 'Godparents' who promise to play a part in the spiritual upbringing of the person being baptised.

The Gospels record Jesus going off into the desert wilderness to be alone and to pray and during one of these times of solitary prayer and contemplation he faced severe temptations and tests. The possibility of taking alternative paths in life were very real and these temptations came to him with great force and attractiveness. However His commitment to God from the youngest age was clear and he was able to resist temptation and, Christians have traditionally held, been able to remain free from sin.

Jesus then embarks on His ministry which, as we have seen lasted one to three years. He had no settled home, did not marry and

depended on the generosity of women and others who supported Him and his followers. Women played a vital part in His ministry and were some of His closest friends. He remained all his life within a fairly narrow area of Palestine, teaching and talking to people and showing them, through parables, the nature of God's love and of God's coming kingdom – even if, as we shall see, this love and this promised kingdom was very different from what people had been expecting.

One of the most extraordinary and well attested parts of Jesus' life was that he mixed with everyone – and for a Jew this was really surprising. Devout, God fearing Jews kept themselves to themselves. They had nothing to do with the Romans unless this was strictly necessary, they did not mix with Samaritans (this was the group of Jews descended from those who remained behind after the Babylonian captivity – they were despised by mainstream Jews who never mixed with them), they looked down on those who collected taxes for the Romans, they despised those who did not keep to the strict purity rules laid down in the Hebrew scriptures, they tended not to talk to or mix with women outside their families and certainly would not be touched by them, they considered that women during the time that they had periods were impure and should keep to their houses, they condemned those who committed ethical failings such as adultery. Jesus, by contrast, mixed with everyone. He talked to Romans and Samaritans, women were his constant companions, a devout woman massaged his feet and wiped away her tears with her hair (a very intimate thing to do!), a former tax collector was one of his closest friends and he was most critical of all of those who thought themselves holy and 'good'. He seemed to find God more readily in those who were outcasts from

respectable society than the wealthy and those who others considered to be righteous and good. It was not surprising that he became both exceedingly popular with ordinary people and exceedingly unpopular with the priests and those in power and authority.

In many ways Jesus was a scandalous figure. An outsider who challenged the complacency of the supposedly religious society in which he lived and who had little time for those who were pleased with themselves because they had 'kept the rules' and were convinced that this made them righteous in God's eyes. He was, at one level, a simple person because His message could be understood by everyone whatever their background but he was also expressing the most profound theological truths with a simplicity that no-one has ever achieved before or since.

In the next chapter we will look at the message that Jesus came to bring although, in many ways, Jesus' life and message are inseparable. He preached about the love of God and the need for forgiveness and drew huge crowds. He ate in different people's houses, attended weddings and was in the middle of life in first century Palestine. His reputation and fame grew as well as his ability to perform the most extraordinary miracles – healing people of many diseases, restoring sight to people who were blind, enabling people who were paralysed to walk, curing a woman with a permanent period, turning water into wine, walking on water and in one case raising someone who had died from the dead. Jesus never performed miracles to prove His power but always out of compassion and, in a number of cases, told the people who had been cured to say nothing about what had been done. Nevertheless as his fame spread He was

constantly surrounded by thousands of people who wanted to listen to him and he felt physically tired and drained. He also knew that his growing reputation as well as His message was unacceptable to the Jewish authorities – his attacks on the priests and those in positions of wealth and influence were popular amongst ordinary people but were unacceptable to the Jewish authorities who, it must be said, had a hard task maintaining Jewish religious freedom in the face of the might of the occupying power of Rome. They feared anything that might provoke a Roman backlash and anything that might result in the limited freedom they had being destroyed.

On one occasion Jesus went to Jerusalem to the Temple with thousands of people around him shouting his name – it was a triumphal procession with people cutting down palms cut from the trees along the route to lay in front of him. He also rode on a donkey which, for a pious Jew, had a symbolism drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and was an effective way of Him proclaiming that He was the promised messiah as it had been prophesied that this was what the Messiah would do. He knew what He was doing and knew that He had gone too far and that the Temple authorities had to take action. He had become a major cult figure and this threatened the stability of the relationship that leading Jews has established with the Romans. Whatever Jesus Himself may have taught, he was now perceived as a dangerous rabble-rouser, a threat to the established social order and therefore, potentially, a threat to the very existence of the Jewish Temple and the freedom Jews had to worship. If support for Jesus had got out of hand, the Romans might crack down and all the long won, albeit limited, freedoms that Jews possessed might be taken away. Their fears were not groundless. About 40 years later, in

69ad, the Romans utterly destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and there was no Jewish state until 1948.

Jesus has a last meal with his twelve closest friends and performed an extraordinary action in washing the feet of his disciples. This would have been a task that a servant of a wealthy man might perform for an honoured guest yet Jesus, the acclaimed prophet and hero of the hour, did this to His disciples. It was an inversion of every normal expectation and challenged, once again, their perceptions of what it meant to be a leader amongst a people dedicated to the service of God.

The Gospels record that, during the last meal with his disciples, one of these friends, Judas, decided to betray Him. It may have been because Judas was disappointed in Him and had expected another sort of leader or it may have been self-interest. Judas betrayed Jesus to the Temple authorities who arrested Him and placed Him on trial. He was too much of a threat to civil order to be allowed to live but the Temple authorities did not have the authority to put him to death – this punishment was reserved to the Romans. The High Priest and his followers therefore took him to the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, who after a show trial in which Pilate came to the conclusion He was innocent, sentenced Him to death. Pilate seemed to have acted against his better instincts but anyone who might purport to be a King would be unacceptable to the Roman Emperor and, therefore, sentencing an insignificant Jew to death probably seemed a politically expedient act. Even then Pilate tried to let Jesus go free as it was a custom to allow one prisoner to go free at the time of the main Jewish holiday – so Pilate appealed to the crowd asking them whether they would prefer him to free a robber and thief,

Barabbas, or Jesus. Given the popularity of Jesus the week before and the crowds that surrounded Him, Pilate might well have expected Jesus to be the automatic choice – but the High priests had got the crowd on their side and their choice fell on Barabbas. Jesus was, therefore, taken off to be crucified.

Crucifixion was an appalling punishment used routinely by the Romans. The condemned person had to carry their own cross and then was nailed to it (with nails through the wrists and ankles). The cross was then lifted up and it could take up to 24 hours for a person to die. The pain was excruciating. Death usually came from asphyxiation as the person could no longer breathe. In Jesus' case, however, it was necessary that he should die within three hours as the Jewish Holy Day, was about to start – so a soldier put a spear into his side to hasten his death. His body was taken down from the cross and he was placed in a tomb owned by a wealthy follower of his – Joseph or Arimathea.

Three days later He rose from the dead. This, of course, is one of the most important Christian claims and is central to Christian belief so it will be dealt with in more detail later.

Chapter Four

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

There is something artificial about separating the message of Jesus from the life of Jesus – the two are so closely related. For the people amongst whom Jesus lived, His life and actions were as important an expression of His message as His teachings. This was particularly the case as He often taught in parables. Parables are stories that are intended to be revelatory – they reveal insights and convey truths but they also reveal something about the people who interpret the parables. Parables seldom have a single meaning.

Jesus stands firmly in the Jewish tradition and many Jews today would be happy to see Jesus as a great rabbi or teacher who affirmed what was central in the Jewish tradition. However there are also key differences. One of the most important was that Jesus was unequivocal in believing in a life after death and many of his Jewish contemporaries were far less clear about this. In fact whether there was a life after death was a major point of dispute between two of the most influential groups of Jews – the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The idea of a life after death had come to prominence in Judaism reasonably late, probably around three centuries before Jesus. Some contemporary scholars see Jewish thinking as having been influenced by the deaths of tens of thousands of young men during what became known as the Maccabean rebellion which was one of many attempts to achieve independence for Israel after the Babylonian captivity. Given the

fidelity of God to God's chosen people, it was felt that the suffering of so many young could best be explained by a life after death. However many Jews did not take this position – Judaism has always been a religion anchored firmly in this world rather than the next and concentration on post-mortem survival has always been somewhat peripheral. Jesus, however, proclaimed a life after death and, more than this, emphasised the fatherhood of God and God's love for all human beings. The word 'all' here is significant as it became clear to Jesus during His ministry that life after death and fellowship with God was open to all human beings and not just the Jews. This was a crucial new insight. It is not clear that Jesus always realised this – stories such as Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26) or His healing the servant of a Roman centurion both seem to indicate that He came to a realisation of the universalisability of God's love. This was, however, an insight that was already present in some strands of Judaism – for instance the prophet Jonah was forced to recognise that God was the god of the whole of creation not just of the chosen people of Israel. Again, here, Christians will differ – some will hold that Jesus had perfect knowledge through His ministry so the idea that Jesus 'came to recognise' something would be rejected.

On one occasion Jesus was approached with a very simple question – but one with profound consequences. Matthew and Luke's Gospels record different occasions for the question. In the Gospel of Luke it asked by a lawyer (chapter 10, verse 25) and in Matthew and by a rich young ruler (chapter 19, verse 16). The question was universal: "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The questioners were probably expecting a simple answer. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus turns the question round and asks the

questioner what is written in the Jewish law. The lawyer's reply was succinct:

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself."

Jesus agrees with this and tells the lawyer to go away and do this. It seems so simple! The lawyer, being a lawyer, then asked 'who is my neighbour' and Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan:

Luke 10:25-37 *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into*

the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

The significance of this is profound. Firstly Jesus is speaking to a devout Jew who would have regarded Samaritans as pariahs so making a Samaritan the central figure in the story would be profoundly disturbing. Secondly the characters who ignored the needs of the injured man were a priest and a Levite. The tribe of Levi was the tribe from whom the priestly class were normally drawn so, effectively, Jesus is saying that two of the type of people who, in Israel society were regarded as most holy and righteous were, in fact, not so. Rather it was the outsider, the Samaritan, who recognised the need of the injured Jewish person. Jesus' message is clear – one's neighbour is everyone who is in need, irrespective of race, skin colour or religious belief. This message was to be central in Christianity becoming the largest religion in the world. Christianity was not just another Jewish sect, it was a universal religion. Its roots lay in Judaism, but its message of the love of God and the demand to love other human beings was universal.

The message was not easy for the early Christians to accept and, after Jesus death, there were many of his original followers who still wanted to see Christianity as merely the development of orthodox Judaism. They considered, therefore, that following Christ meant becoming a Jew and taking on all the rigorous food laws and religious laws that the people of Israel considered normal. It also meant that males had to be circumcised. So strong was this feeling among the early disciples that it took Divine intervention to set matters straight and the revelation to perhaps the most significant of the Apostles – St. Paul.

Paul was a surprising character. He was a conservative and orthodox Jew who was, after Jesus' death, violently opposed to Christianity. Indeed he had orders from the Temple authorities in Jerusalem to travel around cities of the ancient world stamping out this heresy. He was full of hatred for Christians and all they stood for considering Christianity to be an abrogation of all the Judaism stood for. He had held the coats of a mob who stoned to death the earliest Christian martyr, Stephen, and his self-chosen message was to suppress Christianity by any possible means. On a journey to Damascus Saul (later named Paul) had a vision. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul replied "Who art Thou Lord?" and the voice from heaven replied "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." In other words, in that Saul was persecuting Christians he was persecuting Jesus himself. Saul was struck blind and a Christian, Ananias, was instructed by God to go to Paul (who, it must be remembered, was possibly the most feared person among the early Christian community) and to restore his sight. As a result of this Saul effected a complete volte face and became possibly the most influential Christian Apostle. He is called an Apostle even though he never met Jesus when He was alive because he had a direct commission from Jesus.

Saul was an orthodox Jew and, initially, he considered that Christians also had to be Jews. However Paul came to see that Jesus had come to all human beings and that His message was a universal one. He therefore set out to preach the story of Jesus amongst non-Jews (or Gentiles). Indeed Paul is sometimes described as the Apostle to the Gentiles. However when news of what Paul was doing reached the Christians in Jerusalem they were furious because they were certain that Paul was in error –

Christians had to be Jews. Peter was the leader of the Jerusalem Christians and it looked as though Paul would be called to order and Christianity would become another Jewish sect (and there were many at the time). Peter, however, had another vision – a direct message from God in which a huge tray appeared on which were countless types of animals from all over the world. A voice said to him “Kill and eat”. But he, being a devout Jew, replied “No so Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” The voice then replied “What God has cleaned do not you make common.” This was decisive and Peter saw this as a clear command from God that Christianity was to be open to all people, it was simply a Jewish sect. This was a decisive moment as it meant that new Christians did not have to obey Jewish dietary laws or be circumcised. The original message of Jesus was thus confirmed. In the new Christian Church there was, as St. Paul was to later put it, “No Jew or gentile, no slave or free” – all were equal.

So the first and most important command which Jesus affirmed was the absolute centrality of the love of God. Secondly came unconditional love of neighbour. The first command every Jew would recognise and accept, but the second Jesus taught should be taken literally, it did not apply to Jews alone. It also challenged the idea that those who were thought holy were really so.

For Jesus, the love of God for every human being was essential – God was the father of all human beings and should be addressed in the intimate way that a child addresses a father. God was a god of love, wanting above all what was best for individual human beings. God always stood ready to forgive rather than to condemn. The impression of God in the Hebrew Scriptures was

often of a powerful, judgemental God but Jesus showed that this was mistaken. God was like a father who cared for every one of God's children and always stood ready to forgive. What is more, forgiveness was available not once but time and time again. If God, therefore, could forgive the sins and failures of God's children, Christians should be willing to forgive each other. One man asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother – seven times? Jesus said No – not seven times but seventy times seven. In other words Christians should act towards each other as God acted towards them and should be willing to forgive again and again – and yet again. Jesus would always welcome back those who failed, those who did wrong. Jesus told many parables to illustrate this including the parable of the prodigal son, the lost coin and the lost sheep. For Jesus, God almost cared more for those who were lost than those who were faithful. The person who was a failure and marginalised had more need of God than the person who was always faithful.

Central to Jesus teaching was the fatherhood and love of God and the need for people to be willing to accept this love. It is an issue of trust. Central to Christian teaching is that the Christian should trust their whole life to God and should be willing to accept and believe in God's love. God's love is unconditional – it does not come as a result of a person being virtuous or good. God's love is there whatever happens like a parent who will always love a child no matter what the child does. Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in which a rich man had two sons. One of whom was obedient, stayed at home and worked hard. The other, however, demand from the father that the eventual inheritance he could expect should be given to him and he then left home and spent all his father's money on a dissolute life. He ended up destitute

and sleeping with animals. In despair, he decided to go back to his father recognising that it would be better to be one of his father's lowest servants than to go on living as he had been doing. When he returned, the father ran to greet him, put on him the choicest clothes and laid on a great feast for him. This was not because he had done anything good – he had not - but simply because he returned home. The other son resented this because he had spent all his life being loyal and working hard yet his father had never laid on a similar feast for him. Jesus explained that God loves those who have failed, those who have ignored God and yet come back almost more than those or never need forgiveness. It is not, however, easy to accept being loved unconditionally and many reject God because they simply cannot accept that God loves them as they are. Trust in this love is, therefore, a central element of Christian belief.

What is more Christians should refuse to judge others. Only God could truly see into the heart of another human being. Only God could judge truly. If any Christian judged others, then he or she would be judged harshly by God. If Christians forgave others, they would be forgiven by God. Jesus is absolutely clear that the way Christians behaved towards other human beings would determine the way God behaved towards them. God would judge a person by the innermost nature of their hearts – and not by appearances. Jesus therefore condemned those who would make a display of their religious observances. If people were fasting, He said that they should disguise the fact, if people gave to charity, they should do so anonymously. If the real motive for doing good was in order to be recognised by other people then the good actions were actually just self-centred. Jesus said that people should do acts of kindness without others knowing – God sees

into the hearts of everyone and would reward those who did good and punish those who did evil. Jesus was clear that God knows everything – not even a sparrow dies without God knowing about it. Humans are worth more than many sparrows and all human actions are seen by God and judged accordingly.

The one category of people that Jesus did condemn was those who deliberately ignored God or pretended to be devoting their lives to God when they were not. He utterly condemned the priests and religious leaders who were so proud of their own reputation as holy and good but, inside, were self-centred and corrupt. His language about these people was anything but temperate.

Mark 12:38-40 Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

The one incident that the Gospels record when Jesus seemed to have lost his temper was when He went into the Temple in Jerusalem and found it filled with merchants selling things and people who changed money. His anger was that they had turned what should have been a house of prayer to God into, as he termed it, a den of thieves. He took a whip out and physically attached the merchants – His anger was greater because he is recorded as saying ‘This is my father’s house’ referring, of course, to the Christian claim that Jesus was the son of God and not the son of any human father. Instead of devotion to God and a place of holiness the Temple had become something very

different. The extent, therefore, to which Jesus would have been seen as a scandalous and uncomfortable figure by those with money and power is hard to over-emphasis.

For Jesus, prayer should be at the centre of a person's life. Prayer was like talking to a close friend and the Christian should bring all their concerns to God. His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, and the Gospels record what has become the most famous prayer for Christians called 'The Lord Prayer':

*"Our Father who art in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come, Your will be done
In earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread and
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil
For the kingdom, the power and the glory
Are yours, now and forever, Amen."*

If God is truly at the centre of a person's life, then all the things that normally preoccupy people will assume lesser importance. When Jesus' called his first disciples he called them to leave everything behind – friends, family and possessions. God was required to be put into centre stage in a person's life and, if this is done, then money, reputation, sex, appearance and all those things that most people value so highly will be seen in their proper perspective. This does not mean that they are irrelevant, just that once a person seeks to devote their life to God, these other things can only ever be of peripheral importance. Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven – but this was

not what the people amongst he was living expected. He did not preach a new Davidic kingdom which would throw out the Romans and establish Jerusalem as the seat of a new government. The Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was a kingdom in people's hearts. This was in some ways a radical and new idea although the basis for it lay in the Hebrew Scriptures and the teaching of the prophets. Bringing people to see this new understanding of God's kingdom was not easy – it was not the message that people wanted to hear.

Jesus realised that his message would not be readily received. He likened it to a farmer who was scattering seed – some fell on stony ground and withered almost as soon as it germinated, others fell on poor ground and sprang up but had not roots and died whilst others fell on good ground. Similarly the message of Christianity would not be well received by many. Many would either ignore it or else take it on board with enthusiasm but as soon as doubts or difficulties came along it would be abandoned. Jesus never considered his message would be accepted by everyone nor would it be popular. He said that following him would involve pain and suffering, being misunderstood and rejected and it would be hard. He once said (Mark 10) that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (this is a reference to a very narrow gate into the walled city of Jerusalem which a loaded camel would have great difficulty entering). Someone with wealth and possessions will find that his or her heart is anchored in these and it will be almost impossible to centre life on God. Jesus said "Where a person's treasure is, there will there heart be also" – if what is really important to a person is money or power or reputation then this is where a person's heart will be.

Jesus found greatest faith in people who were on the outside of conventional society – a poor widow who had almost no money but gave a few coins which, for her, represented a great deal, a Roman centurion who trusted Jesus’ power to just say that his servant would be healed and accepted that it would happen even though the servant was a long distance away, a woman caught in adultery who trusted Jesus even though everyone else condemned her, another woman who wept for her sins, blind beggars, lepers who were despised and outcasts – these were Jesus’ followers initially.

The rabbis and teachers of Jesus’ time had built up a set of rules that regulated every aspect of the life of a devout Jew and for many of these people keeping the rules had become an end in itself. The Pharisees in particular considered that devotion to God could be measured by the extent to which one kept the rules. Jesus cut through this and taught that what mattered was the change within the heart of a person not whether they kept the rules. For instance he and his disciples were criticised because, when crossing a corn field on the Jewish holy day – the Sabbath – they ate a few ears of corn. This broke the rules and, his critics said, showing that he was not a devout Jew. He failed to wash before a meal and he was criticised because this was one of the strict rules that a Jew had to follow. He talked to people who were regarded as sinners and outcasts, something that no pious Jew would do. He touched a leper which was condemned by the Jewish law. He healed a person on the Jewish Holy Day and this was condemned. The teachers of his time were continually trying to trap him and to show that He was not really a faithful Jew at all, still less a prophet. On one occasion they brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. The

punishment according to the Jewish law was clear; she had to be stoned to death. His critics thought that they had him in a trap – either he had to forgive her and show that he rejected the Jewish law and was not a genuine prophet at all, or he had to condemn her and all his talk of forgiveness would be undermined. Jesus' response was simple. He said that whoever had never committed a sin should throw the first stone. Clearly no-one was in this position so they all went away and left him with the woman. He did not condemn her – merely gently saying 'sin no more'. Gentleness and yet a firm devotion to God was at the heart of all Jesus did and this message shone through in a way that the teaching of the priests and law givers of the time did not.

Whereas most Jews of the time were angry with the Romans, Jesus treated those he met with compassion and understanding. On one occasion an attempt was made to trick him by asking whether Jews should pay taxes to Rome. Again whichever answer he gave would seem to land him in trouble. If he said that taxes should be paid then he would not be seen as a devout Jew and Jews bitterly resented the Roman taxes so he would become unpopular. If he said that taxes should not be paid then he would have been arrested by the Roman authorities. It seemed he could not win. His answer was simple. He asked for a coin to be shown to him and then asked whose head was on the coin. "Caesar's" was the answer – and he simply said "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar but to God the things that belong to God". In other words what mattered was not the issue of taxes but where the hearts of people really were. Many were so preoccupied with money and material things that God had been altogether forgotten.

Jesus was in no doubt that the way a person lived would determine what happened after death and he also was in no doubt that there was a separation between heaven and hell. The punishments in hell were severe. In one case Jesus told the story of a rich man who went to hell and a poor man who used to sit at the gate of the rich man and beg and who went to heaven. The rich man pleaded to be released or, at least, that a message could be sent to his living relatives. Jesus said that no move was possible from hell to heaven and that sending someone to the living relatives who had been dead would not achieve anything. If they did not believe the Jewish prophets they would not even believe if someone rose from the dead (a poignant pointer forward to his own resurrection).

We have already seen that at the Baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, came to Jesus. The role of the Holy Spirit is vital in Christianity – it is the spirit of God in God's self which strengthens, comforts, and in some cases guides Christians. Jesus said to His disciples that when He died He would not leave them as the Holy Spirit would remain with them. The Holy Spirit, Jesus and God in God's self are one and the same in Christianity – this gives rise to one of the most important of all Christian doctrines. This is that God is Trinitarian. God is one, but God is also three. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the three persons of the undivided Trinity with no distinction or separation between them. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that this does NOT mean that God is three separate persons as some critics were to later maintain. Christianity is firmly committed to both the unity of God and to God's essentially Trinitarian nature. This is, Christians accept, a mystery but it is a mystery that is at the heart of Christian faith. The Trinitarian doctrine means that when the Holy

Spirit comes to a Christian this is the same as God in God's self. After Jesus' death at what has become called Pentecost the Holy Spirit came directly to five hundred of Jesus followers when they were gathered together. The presence of the Holy Spirit provides, therefore, the guarantee that God is with them always in a very personal way.

Jesus shared, just before he died as we saw in the last chapter, a meal with his twelve closest friends. This has become known as the Last Supper. At this meal Jesus took bread and broke it and shared the pieces amongst His disciples – however he also said words that were to have a decisive impact on future Christian practice “Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you meet, to remember me”. Then he took wine and when He had given thanks he again shared this with His disciples saying “This is my blood which is given for you. Do this in memory of me.” These words form the basis for what Christians call by different names – the Eucharist, the mass, or the Lord's Supper. Different Christians have varying understanding of how these words of Jesus are to be interpreted. Catholic Christians take the words literally and have long argued that, at the mass, when the priest blesses the bread and wine it literally becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus although this is, by a miracle, concealed from the believer who continues to experience it as bread and wine. The Catholic is, therefore, receiving the very body and blood of Jesus when he or she takes communion. This gives rise to the Catholic practice of the consecrated bread or wafer being adored by the believer and of the priest consecrating the bread and wine (which only a priest can do) and then this being distributed to the faithful by a lay person. Catholics call bread that has been consecrated and kept

in this way 'the reserved sacrament' and it is kept close to the altar with a candle burning beside it. Other Christians such as Anglicans maintain that Jesus is 'really present' at the Eucharist but they do not specify in what way. Many protestant Christians see the bread and wine (some Protestants use fruit juice instead of wine because of the alcoholic nature of wine) as symbolically representing Jesus' presence. There are, therefore, differences in understanding. Nevertheless almost all Christians are united in the importance of taking seriously Jesus' words at the Last Supper.

Jesus had twelve close friends or disciples who accompanied Him throughout His ministry. Three of these were particularly close to Him – Peter, James and John. James and John were brothers whilst Peter was a former fisherman, an impetuous man who would often speak first and think later but who was one of the closest friends Jesus had. Jesus prophesied that the kingdom of heaven was coming and that He, his disciples and all who followed Him would share in this kingdom. Gradually that disciples came to realise that this was not an earthly kingdom but a heavenly one and, naturally enough, the question arose as to who would be the leaders and closest to Jesus in His new kingdom. The mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked if her sons could sit one on His left and one on His right when He came into His new kingdom. In asking this, she showed a lack of understanding as to the nature of the coming kingdom. Unlike earthly kingdoms the new heavenly kingdom would be one of love and service where those who sought to be first would be least important and those who were humble and thought nothing of themselves would be first. It was an inversion of all the values for which worldly power and achievement stood. Jesus pointed

out that the path to the new kingdom lay through service to others, suffering and death – hardly an attractive prospect. He also made clear that Christians would necessarily suffer in this world just as He would have to suffer. Jesus, therefore, inverted all the normal ideas of power often associated with God. For Jesus, God’s power was shown most clearly in compassion, suffering and love. It was the power of weakness not of might. This was most clearly emphasised in the picture of Jesus dying on the cross – dying like a common criminal alone, despised and rejected by human beings. Yet, Christians hold, this is God in God’s self dying on the cross. God becomes human and suffers as a human and does so out of love.

Peter was impulsive but had a genuinely good heart. He felt himself totally committed to Jesus and would have done anything for Him. However the gospels are realistic – and when Jesus was about to face arrest and His coming death, Peter vehemently declared his love and undying loyalty. Jesus gently told him that, before the cock crowed to indicate that the night was over, Peter would deny Him three times. After Jesus’ arrest Peter followed Jesus to the High Priest’s house where He was taken, but Peter was recognised and was accused of being one of Jesus’ disciples. Peter denied it in the strongest terms - this happened twice more and, after the third denial, the cock crew. Peter felt bitterly ashamed and angry with himself. We have, therefore, one of Jesus closest friends who was weak and fully capable of failure, yet this was the man who Jesus chose to lead the Church that would carry on Jesus’ work after His death. This is part of a theme running through both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – that God chooses those who are outsiders and who are despised in worldly terms, not the powerful and successful.

One of the controversial passages in the Gospels specifically concerns Peter. Peter was formerly called Simon and is renamed Peter by Jesus. The word ‘*petros*’ also means stone in Greek and Jesus uses a play on words to say “*You are Peter, and on this petros (rock) I will build my Church*”. Peter is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven and is told that the forces of evil will not prevail against the Church. All authority is given by Jesus to the Church thus founded by Jesus and Peter is placed at its head – “*whoever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whoever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*”. This is central to the Catholic understanding that Peter was the first leader of the Christian Church, the first Pope and that successors to Peter would have complete authority over the Christian Church on earth and in heaven. Still today the papal seal has the symbol of crossed keys indicating that the keys of the kingdom belong to the Pope and Catholic priests can release or forgive people for sins committed on earth. Protestants tend to play this passage down or even consider that it may have been inserted before the Gospels were produced in their final form and, therefore, are less willing to give authority to the Church. This is an issue to which we will need to return.

Jesus death was not, however, simply the death of another innocent human life. It is also seen as a sacrifice. The idea of a sacrifice is not one that is widely accepted in the modern world. A sacrifice is when a person gives up or sacrifices something of value which they treasure for a higher cause. Sometimes a person is held to have sacrificed their life in a battle by allowing themselves to be killed to save the lives of comrades. In all religions, sacrifice has been an important idea – ranging from the willingness of an individual to sacrifice their own self-interest to

help others or to achieve discipline over their own life to the sacrifice required to benefit the community. Jesus, Christians hold, sacrificed His own life out of love to bring people back to God – to eliminate the cumulative centuries of sin and disobedience and to allow a new start. It is true that Jesus was crucified at the request of the Temple authorities and with Roman approval but, particularly in John’s Gospel, Jesus is seen as readily and willingly going to His death. Remember Jesus is held to be God – God who could do anything but the power of God is shown not in omnipotence and blasts from the sky but rather in love. So Jesus lays down his life, willingly and by His own choice, for his friends. What is more, He specifically says that all are friends of Jesus who listen to what He taught and take his words seriously – who try to love God and love their neighbours with all their heart and mind and soul. Christians, therefore, see Jesus laying down his own life and suffering an agonising and terrible death in order to bring people to God – to redeem them from the cumulative effects of sin. It is for this reason that Christians refer to Jesus as their Saviour – the one who saves them from the effects of sin and disobedience and brings them home to God their Father.

Chapter Five

THE RESURRECTION AND THE INITIAL SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

The New Testament consists of the four gospels, a number of letters written by St. Paul and others, a final book called 'Revelation' and the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles (often referred to simply as 'Acts') is generally agreed to have been written or compiled by the compiler of Luke's Gospel and is a second part of this work. It contains some of the earliest records of what happened immediately after Jesus' death.

In the last chapter we saw that Jesus was crucified by the Romans and, after His death, placed in a stone cave hewn out of rock with a large stone rolled across it. He died on the day Christians call 'Good Friday' at about 3.00a.m. in the afternoon and his body would have been placed in the tomb the same day. In the heat of Palestine, it was essential that bodies were buried quickly. Jesus' friends and disciples were in despair – and also full of fear that the Jewish authorities might hunt them down next. They were dispirited and demoralised. Their friend and leader, for whom they had given up everything, was dead and all his promises seemed to have come to nothing.

On the Sunday morning, either one or two women (the accounts differ) went down to the tomb. These were Jesus' closest friends and they went down to mourn. They found that the huge stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was empty, the body had gone. The grave clothes, in which Jesus' body would have

been wrapped, were neatly placed in a corner. One gospel account records that two angels were in the tomb. The fear and consternation felt by the women are not hard to imagine. One of them saw someone she took to be a gardener and, thinking that he had taken Jesus' body somewhere else, she asked him where the body had gone. The supposed Gardener simply uttered her name 'Mary' and she instantly recognised it was Jesus. She ran to throw her arms round him in amazement and joy but he said no – he had not ascended yet to His Father and her Father, to His God and her God. Mary was instructed to go and tell the disciples what had happened. In another Gospel account it is Peter who comes down after Mary and therefore sees what has happened.

The news that Jesus had risen from the dead and had been seen by Mary and Peter was greeted with amazement by the disciples and one of them, Thomas, simply could not believe it. He said, understandably, that he would not believe it unless he could see Jesus for himself and place his finger in the hole in Jesus' side where the soldier's spear had pierced it and also in the holes in His hands. When Jesus did appear to Thomas and he finally believed, Jesus said that those who believed without seeing the physical evidence had greater faith and were more blessed. Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room (they were hiding and in fear or arrest by the Jewish Temple authorities) and on other occasions. On one occasion, two of the disciples were walking to a nearby town called Emmaus and Jesus walked with them without them recognising Him. It was only in the evening when he shared their meal and broke bread with them that they recognised him. Shortly afterwards, Jesus appeared to 500 followers who had come together in Jerusalem. One of the most famous appearances of Jesus was to St. Paul (recorded in Chapter

Three) although in this case Paul heard a voice rather than seeing Jesus.

Christians record several stages after Jesus' death. In the first stage Jesus appears to various disciples and followers with the same body that he had when He died – the marks of the nails were in His hands and feet and the spear mark could be seen in His side. The next stage was when He had ascended to God (this is referred to as the Ascension). After this, Jesus does not appear in bodily form, but the Holy Spirit comes to the new Christian followers. As we have seen, an essential part of Christianity is that God is Trinitarian – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is, therefore, no distinction between God the Father, Jesus the son and the Holy Spirit. All three are one and the same God. When, therefore, the Holy Spirit comes to believers it is actually seen by Christians as Jesus Himself coming to them and being with them.

If one event is more crucial than any other to Christian belief it is the resurrection. The Apostle Paul wrote “If Christ be not raised, we are of all people the most to be pitied.” Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus has always been pivotal to Christian faith – as well as the conviction that all who trust in Christ and seek to live lives accordingly will one day join Him in paradise. Jesus was a remarkable and extraordinary human being but the event that singles Him out from every other remarkable teacher and leader is the resurrection. It is reasonable, therefore, to ask what evidence there is for the resurrection. Clearly we have the recorded testimony of those to whom He appeared after His death, but what other evidence is there?

One of the most remarkable and extraordinary events in history is the extent to which Jesus' followers – a small, frightened group

who were in fear of the Jews who had just, with the co-operation of the Roman authorities, slain their leader and who were in hiding changed to a group who went out with total confidence and joy preaching 'Christ crucified'. They no longer had any fear at all and, indeed, some were put to death and met their death calmly in the total conviction that death was not the end. This was a key mark of the early Christians; they faced death without any fear at all, which made them every bit as frightening as the kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers of our age. This transformation is very hard indeed to explain in terms of a psychological delusion or mass paranoia. The best and simplest explanation is that the stories of the resurrection are true. No other explanation can so persuasively account for the total transformation that took place in the frightened disciples – particularly as this was not an expectation shared by most Jews and it would have been greeted with incredulity by non-Jews.

The resurrection is at the heart of Christianity as is the identity of Jesus. Jesus asked his close friends at one point in His ministry 'Who do people say that I am?' and they replied that popular opinion differed – some said he was Elijah who had come back again, some said one of the great prophets. Jesus then asked 'Who do you say that I am?' and the impulsive Peter replied 'You are the Christ'. In many ways this is the key issue. Who is Jesus? If he was just a great teacher and a great Jewish rabbi then Christianity is false. If he was an extraordinary prophet – one of a long list of prophets, then Christianity is false. Christians affirm that Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God, God incarnate come to redeem the world by His sacrifice. If this is true, then the resurrection is not improbably at all.

In the early years after Jesus' death there was a conviction that Jesus would return a second time and that this would happen in the near future. So much was this the case, that St. Paul saw no need for people to marry or change their status as the end of the world would soon be coming. However as time went on, the recognition grew that this was a misunderstanding and that Jesus would not return until the world's end.

Christianity spread initially among Jews and it must be remembered that there were Jewish communities and often Synagogues in all the major centres of the ancient world. However after Christianity was opened to non-Jews (cf p. Xxx) then there was explosive growth among people of all races. Often the early Christians were women or slaves who responded to Jesus' central message of God's love and forgiveness.

Initially the Christian message was spread by word of mouth and small groups of believers started to meet in each other's houses. However there was little in the way of central organisation and each community was autonomous. The New Testament was not in existence at this stage and verbal reports of Jesus' message, death and resurrection were all that was available. It was inevitable that diversity of beliefs and practices should emerge. St. Paul was, as we have seen, responsible more than anyone else for the spread of Christianity. He travelled through much of the known world in an epic series of journeys almost all on foot or by boat and wherever he went he left communities of new Christians. However once Paul had left these communities, they were directionless and things began to go wrong. For instance in one community instead of the new Christians commemorating the Last Supper as a solemn meal to remember Jesus, it became a

huge feast with the wealthy showing off their wealth. Paul had to write firm letters setting these new Christian communities straight and pointing out their errors.

St. Paul preached fearlessly wherever he went, often adapting his preaching to the local situation. So when he came to Athens where people believed in many gods, he started speaking by saying that he had seen an altar dedicated 'To the unknown God'. He therefore set out to proclaim the unknown god as revealed by Jesus. Often his preaching made people angry, particularly Orthodox Jews. On a number of occasions his life was threatened. As he travelled, so his fame spread and so did the influence of the Christian gospel. Paul became known as a troublemaker, simply because controversy and opposition followed him around. He was therefore placed under arrest.

Paul, however, was a Roman citizen – and this carried many privileges. Rome was the master of the known world and a Roman citizen was immune from trial by local jurisdictions. All a Roman had to do was to say 'I appeal to Rome' and local courts could no longer try him, he had to be taken to Rome for trial. This happened to St. Paul c.58AD and he duly appealed to Rome. He was therefore sent on the long and slow journey to Rome accompanied by a soldier escort. As he travelled, so he continued to preach. He eventually came to Rome where he was placed under house-arrest pending trial. The conditions were quite civilised and he was able to receive visitors. The Christian message had already spread as far as Rome and there were Christian followers in Rome who hastened to visit Paul, and Paul preached to them. Numbers grew even faster and so did Paul's reputation.

Jerusalem was the initial centre of the Christian Church. It was in Jerusalem that the original disciples of Jesus lived and as long as Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect this made sense. Once, however, Christianity became open to people of all races then Jerusalem was no longer the natural centre. Once Paul came to Rome and with the enormous population of Rome and its position of influence, Rome eventually became the new centre, particularly as St. Peter is reported to have travelled to Rome and to have ended his life there. Paul died in Rome, eventually sentenced to death by an Emperor nervous of the growing appeal of Christianity but martyrdom was something welcomed by early Christians and numbers of believers grew even more rapidly.

Little is known of the development of Christianity in the sixty years after Jesus' death apart from the letters of Paul and a few others – but what is clear is that its growth was explosive. Christians were soon to be found in all corners of the Roman Empire. However Christianity was seen as new a sect that was viewed with great suspicion. Christians believed in a single god whereas Romans and Greek believed in many gods. What was more, Roman emperors sometimes declared themselves to be gods and demanded that everyone should offer sacrifices at altars dedicated to them. This, of course, Christians could not accept. What was worse, stories grew up associating Christians with terrible practices such as eating human flesh. It is, perhaps, easy to understand why this would be the case since at the Lord's supper Jesus' own words were used – commanding His followers to eat His flesh and drink His blood in the form of bread and wine. These stories and the extent to which Christians were seen as some sort of secret society began to attract the attention of the

authorities and, under some emperors, Christians were persecuted.

There were many contributory factors. The values of Christians ran completely counter to the values of Roman society. Christians rejected the glorification of power and money, the cult of masculine strength and imperial domination that was normal in the empire. They preached compassion and the equality of all people – including women and slaves. They preached love, fidelity in marriage and a negative attitude to sexual promiscuity. All these ideas made them in some way alien to normal Roman society and aliens tend to be viewed with suspicion by the authorities.

Combined with the explosive growth of Christianity in the early years was a growing (if varied) persecution. Christians were tortured and killed and, increasingly, were used as fodder in the great arenas of the Roman Empire where gladiators fought to the death and wild beasts entertained the mob by killing people. The Christians, instead of resisting and providing entertainment, sang hymns as they waited to be killed. Their lack of fear added to their strangeness when compared with the rest of society. Christians had no fear – they were convinced that God was supporting them and that the God of love would care for them. Death was nothing; it was but a doorway to eternal life. Unlike some modern suicide martyrs today, however, the lives of the early Christians were filled with love and a commitment to compassion for those who were weak and even for those who were putting them to death – for whom they prayed. Some early Christian communities shared all their possessions and pooled their resources.

It is really quite extraordinary. Christianity started its explosive growth in a society with great inequality, where courage and strength were glorified, where bravery in battle was seen as the highest virtue, where the favourite public entertainment was to see human beings killed in a brutal manner and where sexual permissiveness was rampant. Against this background Christianity offered love of an unseen God, total trust in God, a spirit of peace and love for all human beings regardless of their race or social class, fidelity to one partner on marriage and no material rewards at all. Simply the assurance that the love of God the Christian experienced in this life would continue after death and that death itself became a triviality – merely the gate to everlasting life. It could not have been a more counter-cultural message yet within three centuries this tiny ‘new’ religion focussing on a man crucified as a common criminal in a remote Roman province had become the official religion of the Emperor of Rome. People who followed Jesus found a peace and a joy that they had never before experienced. They trusted each other and this trust was a liberation and a new experience. They refused to judge others and instead sought to help them in any way they could. The response was persecution and ridicule and the might of the greatest empire the world had ever known turning on Christianity and using every means to suppress it. All that happened was that it grew even faster.

In these early formative years (between about 40AD and 100AD) the earliest Christian doctrines and ideas began to develop. We have already seen that many Biblical scholars consider that John’s Gospel must be the latest Gospel to be written as it is more theological than the synoptic gospels. This is probably true (although the shortest gospel, that of Mark, is also highly

sophisticated albeit in a different way), but what is less certain is that theological sophistication depends necessarily on date. St. Paul had a very developed and sophisticated theology yet all scholars acknowledge that Paul's letters are the earliest records of Jesus' life, message and death. There is, it must be admitted, a trend in recent years among some academic theologians and Biblical scholars to 'explain away' anything in the Gospels that actually see Jesus as who Christians believe He was – God incarnate, come to earth out of love for human beings, who died on the cross and was resurrected. If this basic claim is rejected, then the theological insights or miracles recorded in the New Testament can easily be seen as a human construct reflecting on prior events. Yet Christians claim that, in the incarnation, the heavenly and earthy realms intersect. There is no longer a division between heaven and earth. The old boundaries are destroyed and undermined. The miracle stories are no more than one would expect if God came to earth as a mere human being – fully human but still fully God. This God consented (as John's gospel claims) to take flesh and to live among human beings, sharing their condition and weakness, sharing in the troubles, suffering and joy. God in God's self became incarnate and consented to be crucified on the cross to redeem human beings from the cumulative effects of sin and pain and to restore once more the relationship of love between God and human beings which had always been intended since the creation of the world.

The intersection between the heavenly and earthly realms is seen nowhere more clearly in Christian practice than in the Eucharist or Lord's supper where Jesus Christ is held to be really present to the believer. God and humans are reconciled by an act of unconditional love by God – not because human beings are good,

but only because they are loved by God. Love does not seek justification, it does not ask for reasons or justification. God loves human beings for themselves alone – NOT because of their virtue but in spite of their failings. This love is a transforming love which changes people. Being loved, makes people capable of love. Being forgiven makes people capable of forgiving. Not being judged leads people not to judge others.

After the death of Peter and Paul and with Rome now established as the recognised centre of a growing number of Christian communities, the need became clear for some sort of organisation and some clarity about the nature of Christian beliefs and practice. This in which the early Christian Church formed was to lay the groundwork for Christian understanding of God, of Jesus and of human beings in relation to God. The process was to take several centuries and it is to this we must not turn.

Chapter Six

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

One of the most important arguments between Christians is which comes first, which is to be given priority:

- 1) The Christian Church, or
- 2) The Bible

This issue underlies many misunderstandings between Christians and still provokes great argument. Very broadly (and all these issues are complex and cannot easily be simplified), Catholics give precedence to the Church which they see as being founded by Jesus to carry on His work in His name and which is placed on earth to bring people to God and Protestants who see the Bible as primary and the individual's relationship with God as central and the Church as secondary. As one might expect with a debate that has continued for nearly two thousand years, the issues are not straightforward.

Protestants see the Bible as crucial and consider that it is inspired directly by God. The Bible is, therefore, the key text for the Christian and each Christian should be able to read the Bible by him or herself and develop his or her own relationship with God. The Church is secondary to the primacy of the Biblical record and, whilst important, is nevertheless to be judged against the word of the Bible. This was the great Protestant theologian, Martin Luther's, position when he rejected the teaching of the Catholic

Church of which he was a part and demanded that if anyone wanted to refute his arguments this should be done by ‘the plain word of Scripture alone’. Many Christians find this position persuasive – however the alternative position is just as convincing.

Those who see the role of the Church as being primary will say that it is the Church that put the Bible together. There were many early accounts of Jesus’ life – as the number of Christians grew, so too did the number of stories about Him and His life. Some of these were considered to be true, and others were seen as legends or stories told after His death by those who never actually knew him. It became important, therefore, to separate those stories which could be regarded as reliable and authoritative from those that were less reliable. This process took up to about 228CE – in other words about 190 years after Jesus’ death. It was not until this date that the ‘canon’ of the New Testament was agreed. The ‘canon’ is those books and letters about Jesus which the Church considered authoritative and reliable. Catholics will, therefore, see the Bible as a collection of vitally important early records about Jesus but it is the Church that is held to be primary and the Church that put together the New Testament.

The debate between these positions is ongoing. Until about the 1965 (the time of the Second Vatican Council), the Bible tended to be regarded by Catholics as not being of the same central importance as it was among Protestants. Indeed there were few Catholic Biblical scholars and academic study of the Bible was discouraged in Catholic circles. This is no longer the case today

and Catholic and Protestant academics together study the Bible and seek to understand its sources and origins.

Other modern voices have been raised which challenge the selection of the books which formed the 'canon' of the New Testament. Feminist theologians, for instance, hold that the early Church deliberately 'selected out' those early records which gave a central place to women and, particularly, Mary Magdalene in the development of the early Church. These feminist theologians argue that the early Church quickly became dominated by men and sought to present a male, patriarchal understanding of God and the Church. So only priests could be male and maleness as an image of God was regarded as the norm. Female vocabulary tended to be resisted and a feminist reading of the Gospels would see a pivotal role for women in Jesus' ministry which was all too often neglected or deliberately suppressed.

There is no doubt that in the first four to five centuries after the death of Jesus, as the numbers of Christian grew at an explosive rate, there were many fierce debates about the nature of Christian doctrine and about which ideas were to be considered as 'orthodox' or true and which were to be considered as 'heretical' or false. The basic Christian story was interpreted in many different ways by groups who had particularly ideas or interpretations. The lack of a clear central authority in the early years made this problem worse – each major city had its own bishop and these bishops came together very occasionally to agree on orthodoxy. Even this was not possible in the early years until Christianity became a recognised religion of the Roman Empire.

The main heresies of challenges to early Christian beliefs are listed below. The word ‘heresy’ means a departure from Orthodox Christian beliefs and has been particularly a feature of Roman Catholicism which sees the authority of the Church founded by Jesus as being paramount and holds that the Holy Spirit preserves the Church from making fundamental errors of doctrine. Anyone, therefore, who rejects the teaching of the Church or seeks to amend or alter it in its fundamentals is regarded as a heretic.

MARCIONISM

This was one of the earliest heresies and was one of the first to be condemned by the Church in Rome in 144AD. Within about a hundred years, therefore, of Jesus death we have a clear Church organisation in Rome capable of taking a stand on an issue of doctrine. Marcion argued that the fierce and vengeful God of the Hebrew scriptures was very different from the God of love of the Christian scriptures. He therefore argued for a dualist position with two forces in the Universe – one good and one evil. The Christian God revealed by Jesus was opposed to the Hebrew God who was seen as evil. For the Marcionists, love was the key to all Christian teaching and his supporters tended to be strongly anti-Jewish because of their rejection of the God of the Hebrew scriptures and they also rejected the main Gospels with the exception of the Gospel of Luke which they revised (it was called the Gospel of Marcion – some modern scholars reverse this order and maintain that the present Gospel of Luke is based on Marcion’s Gospel). Marcionism is often considered to be a dualist position because it considered the world to be evil and to be the creation of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Release from this

world comes from the God of love revealed by Jesus who calls Christianity to put the world firmly into second place, to develop their spiritual nature and to let love guide them in all their dealings with the world.

Mainstream Christianity rejected Marcionism as it was firmly committed to continuity between the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Certainly it did not reject the importance of love, but it saw Jesus fulfilling and completing God's revelation through the Hebrew prophets and in no sense being opposed to their teaching.

GNOSTICISM

Marcionists were Gnostics but the term Gnostic covers a wide movement of idea which pre-date Christian and continued into the middle ages. Gnostics see the world as being evil and deny that a good God could have created a world with so much evil in it. There are many different Gnostic positions but they tend to deny that the world is good and, therefore, tend to be negative about most of the features of the world, often including marriage, sex and good. Some emphasised a secret knowledge which was revealed only to believers. The world, they generally see, as a battleground between the forces of evil and the forces of light or goodness. Human beings are essentially spiritual creatures, creatures of light who are imprisoned in earth bound, material bodies. The task of human beings is therefore to avoid being corrupted by the material world and to see to develop their spiritual potentialities so that, after death, they will be reunited with their light from which they originally came.

The early Gnostics saw all matter as being evil and, therefore, they held that when Jesus died it was only His spirit that ascended to God and not His body. One of the important parts of the early Christian creeds specifically rejected this and all Christian today affirm the central importance that Jesus' body was physically resurrected.

The negative attitude to the world was an important feature of some parts of early Christian and, if adopted, could have easily led Christians to deny the importance of the world – but they did not do so. Traditionally Christianity has always affirmed that the world is good and is the creation of a good and loving God. The evil and suffering that entered the world was never God's plan or intention and was due to the actions of free beings created by God to love God and each other. Nevertheless the influence of Gnosticism has continued as a minority position among some who claim to be Christians – possibly the most importance single instance of Gnosticism resurfacing was amongst the Cathars in South West France and we will return to them later.

ARIANISM

Arianism was one of the most important and influential Christian movements. Arius argued against the view that God the Father and Jesus, God the son, has always existed. He was drawing on a previous heresy called MONARCHIANISM. Monarchists held that Jesus was an ordinary human being into who God the Father had placed a divine spark. They were sometimes called 'adoptionists' as they maintained that Jesus was the adopted Son of God – not, therefore, part of God's essence.

Arius argued that God the Father has always existed but that the Son was not pre-existent with the Father but was created by the Father. This was a most important issue – it nearly divided the Church and, in the fourth century, it was far from clear which position would be regarded as orthodox. The supporters of Arius were very strong – his position seemed to make much sense as Jesus himself seemed to regard God as superior to Him and at the baptism of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descended on Him, this could easily be regarded as supporting Arius' position. This in no way denied the supreme sovereignty of God the Father nor did it deny that Jesus was the son of God or that the Holy Spirit intimately connected the two.

Like all the history of heresies in the early Church the position was complicated. Arius was a priest in Egypt and he attacked his Bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, as being a heretic for holding that the Son had always existed with the Father. Alexander gathered 100 bishops from Egypt and Libya together in a Council and they condemned Arius (in spite of him having considerable support) and declared him to be a heretic and he was excommunicated (effectively excluded from the Christian church). Arius had considerable support in the East of the Roman Empire – particularly in Palestine and Libya. Bishops from the East gathered together and condemned the Council called by Alexander and reinstated Arius.

The Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, tried to resolve the problem – but actually made matters worse. He called together the great Council of Nicaea – the largest gathering of Christian bishops that had ever met with 300 in attendance. The primary aim of the Council was to resolve this theological issue.

The result was what has become called 'The Nicene Creed' which was meant to condemn the Arians. However the Arians could accept most of the wording of this creed, albeit by reinterpreting the way words were used, so the position was not really clarified. Things got more complicated because in 327AD Arius was reinstated and one of his closest allies, Eusebius, became one of the Emperor's closest advisors. Putting it simply, the Emperor had changed his mind. This is an example of the political trends that have affected the development of Christian doctrine – Christians have always been committed to the idea of truth and it is important to recognise that the development of ideas in the early Church was affected by political intrigues.

Arius died and there was a confused period of about sixty years including a period when a pagan emperor came on to the Roman imperial throne. It was not until 379AD when the Emperor Theodosius took the throne in what was now the Eastern part of the Roman Empire that things settled down. Theodosius was a firm opponent of Arian position and he deposed the bishops who supported this. In 387 he called the great Council of Christian bishops in Constantinople, which is now Istanbul. The Creed that was produced then, essentially the Nicene Creed with some amendments to make clear that the Arian position was heretical, represented the final refutation of the Arian position.

NESTORIANISM

Claims that Jesus was two separate persons – a human being and also a divine being. Jesus had two totally distinct natures. They rejected the claim that Mary was 'Mother of God' as this would mean that Jesus was brought into existence at the time of His birth and would, effectively, be younger than Mary. The Divine

Jesus, the Nestorians held, was pre-existent but the human Jesus came into existence as the child of Mary. Nestorius was initially a monk but he was also a brilliant teacher and was invited by the Eastern Emperor, Theodosius, to become Patriarch of Constantinople (Constantinople was the centre of Eastern Christianity and the seat of power of the Eastern Roman emperor so the Patriarch of Constantinople was the second most senior position in the Christian Church). Nestorians argued that Mary should be described as 'Christokos' or 'mother of Christ' and not 'Theotokos' or Mother of God. Nestorianism was partly a reaction to Arianism as it wanted to hold onto the view that Jesus' divine nature pre-existed with God from the beginning of time but by separating Jesus' human and divine nature it made a breach in traditional Christian understandings of Jesus as both fully God and fully man that was unacceptable and, therefore, heretical.

PELAGIANISM

Is different from the other heresies set out above as whereas these were concerned with the status of the Trinity; Pelagianism is concerned with the nature of human beings. Pelagius was a British monk who first came to Rome in 391ad. Pelagius argued that human beings are born innocent – in other words they are free from any stain of Original Sin. The doctrine of Original sin was important as it held that all human beings were affected by the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus, therefore, had to accept the sin of all human beings on Himself – he was the Saviour of all human beings as, without Jesus' sacrifice and death on the cross, human beings would be condemned due to the effects of original sin. Pelagius rejected this and held that every human baby is innocent at birth and that it is up to the will of

each individual to decide to act in a morally good or evil way. This was a profound attack on two principal Christian ideas.

Firstly Pelagianism rejects the idea of Original sin and, therefore, rejects Jesus role as Saviour. This was important enough in itself, but the second issue was even more important. If human beings are free from sin at birth and can then decide for themselves whether to be good or evil, then there is no room for the grace of God which, early Christians insisted, was necessary to help people to live a virtuous life. St. Augustine held that in the absence of grace no-one could be virtuous or grace. Only the Christian was eligible for Divine Grace so only Christians could do good acts since, necessarily, a good act required the grace of God. Non-Christians, therefore, could not do good acts – it was essential to first become a Christian. Pelagius rejected this. Anyone was capable of being either good or evil and grace was not required. This means that the Greek philosophers or believers in other gods could do good acts just as much as the Christian – this would have represented a profound attack on the nature of the Church as, to be good, Christianity was not essential and, therefore, the need to be baptised and to join the Christian Church was diminished.

Pelagius was not initially condemned and, indeed, his writings were said not to be heretical at all by various influential figures – a Council of Bishops in 415AD specifically said his writings were not heretical. Pope Innocent 1 proclaimed that Pelagius was not a heretic but he was succeeded by Pope Zozimus who, while initially refusing to condemn Pelagius, finally did so and he formally condemned Pelagianism as a heresy.

The issue centrally revolves around freewill. Are human beings born free and capable of making their own decisions? If so, Pelagius was right. If, however, it is held that Original Sin has corrupted individuals so that they have lost their freedom, then Pelagius was wrong as Jesus' role as saviour was vital in freeing people from the stain of Original Sin and making freedom possible.

From the years of debate about Christian doctrine emerged the Christian creeds – the formal statement of traditional Christian belief. The best known is the Nicene Creed which was drafted in 325AD and amended at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The origin of the creed is much older and some hold that it goes back to the time of the first Christian Apostles, but many modern scholars have doubts about this and consider that the origins of the creeds may be about a hundred years after Jesus' death and they would then have been modified in succeeding years in response to the challenges which have been outlined above. It may have been that, from the early years, Christians recited the creed as a formal statement of their common belief.

The revised version of the Nicene Creed is as follows:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he

rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

This creed summarises Christian belief. The main features are:

- Belief in one God.
- Jesus is the son of God but ‘begotten not made’ and is of ‘one substance’ with the father. This is a complex inter-relationship of ideas – Jesus is born as a human being but pre-existed His birth. The second person of the Trinity is no different from God the father but takes flesh and becomes human when Jesus was born.
- Jesus came to earth (was incarnate) to save human beings from the effects of sin.
- The creed firmly anchors belief in history. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and was crucified under Pontius Pilate – a clearly named Roman figure.
- Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. The crucifixion and resurrection is at the heart of Christian faith.
- Jesus will return to earth at the final judgement to judge both those who are living and those who have died.

- The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Divine Trinity and proceeds from the Father. This latter phrase is important and was to cause a major division in the Christian Church later. The Holy Spirit is the same as God's Word who spoke through the Hebrew prophets (thus emphasising the continuity of the God of the Hebrew Scriptures with the God worshipped by Christians).
- Belief in one 'catholic' Church. The word 'catholic' means universal – so this is just a way of affirming belief in one, universal Church of Christians. Note the use of the small 'c' in 'catholic' - it is not a phrase specifically related to the Roman Catholic Church.
- There is a single baptism which marks the entry of an individual into the Christian Church. This is important as all major Christian churches still recognise a single baptism and this still points to a fundamental unity among Christians. Some, such as the Baptists, tend to insist on adult baptism but most Churches accept infant baptism.

Almost all Christians consider acceptance of the Nicene Creed as being an essential pre-requisite of being a Christian. Some groups such as Jehovah's witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints reject the Nicene Creeds and some evangelical Christians who give priority to the Bible do not accept it simply because it is not contained in the Bible. However most mainstream Christian Churches do accept it and it comes closest, therefore, to a clear summary of mainstream Christian belief.

Chapter Seven

DIVISION, DISCORD, UNITY AND GROWTH

The Christian Church faced severe threats after the sack of the City of Rome and the near collapse of the Roman Empire. Romulus Augustus, the last western Roman emperor, was deposed in 476AD and thus began what some historians have referred to as 'the dark ages'. The Roman Empire had been in retreat for some time and, after 476AD, the authority of Constantinople, the Centre of Eastern Christianity, became even more important. The greatness of Rome and its mastery of the entire known world was gone although the Christian Church continued to expand with missionaries being sent out across Europe and further afield with great success. Monasteries were founded based on the early Christian individuals who went off into the desert to find God in solitude and prayer. No-one was more influential in the movement than St. Benedict (480 – 537AD) who established the idea of a rule based monastic life and whose 'rule of St. Benedict' still guides the lives of tens of thousands of Christian monks in Benedictine and related communities around the world today.

Benedict came from a wealthy Roman family and was well educated. He knew all about the attractions available to a wealthy young man, including the love of a woman, and he rejected all these in order to take seriously the Christian message and to seek to live his whole life drawing closer to God. He left Rome to seek a place to be away from the bustle of the city and

gathered together a small group of what were to become friends who resolved to devote their lives to prayer and to service to others. He became well known for his piety, gentleness and holiness and when, some years later, the abbot of a local Christian monastery died, the monks sent to Benedict and asked him to become their abbot. Reluctantly he went, but relations broke down and, so stories have been passed down, the monks tried without success to poison him. He left the monastery and went back to the valley where he had previously lived. He built twelve small monasteries, each under the guidance of an abbot and he became abbot of one of these. From such modest beginnings Benedict began to found schools to educate children. Possibly his greatest achievement was the 'Rule of St. Benedict' which describes how to live a life centred on Christ and build on service to others. The rule governs almost every aspect of life and is as relevant today to those seeking the monastic path as it was when Benedict first wrote it. It calls monks to obedience, to prayer, to service to visitors, to work to support the monastery but, above all, to humility. It was a message that many in the wealthy cities of Europe would have rejected in the sixth century as many would today, but it is also a message with a timeless appeal.

People responded to the Christian message and, across Europe, Kings, courtiers and ordinary people rejected the old idea of idols and instead accepted the Christian preaching of worship of a single God. It was an extraordinary transformation. The old power of Rome was declining rapidly and its imperial authority was becoming a thing of the past, but out of this collapse in influence came a new authority based on Christian teaching and

worship of God that gave people hope in times that were otherwise violent and dark.

The Christian Church remained centred on Rome but there were now two great powers in the Christian world – one was Rome and the other was Constantinople. Christian leaders in the East which fell under Constantinople always acknowledge the precedence of Rome but this was to change as Roman power dwindled. In particular, The Patriarch of Constantinople, in 864, seized on a variation in the Nicene Creed which was accepted by the Western Church and used this as a pretext to claim that the whole Church centred on Rome has entered into heresy.

In order to understand the significance of this, as otherwise it will seem trivial, it is essential to understand that the united Christian Church including all the Bishops from the known world had come to an agreement on the wording of the Nicene Creed. Certainly there had been strong disagreements and, as we saw in the last chapter, many passionate advocates of alternative positions but, in the final analysis, agreement was reached. What was more, this agreement was by the united Christian Church. Any departure from this agreement by a particular group was seen as heretical. Effectively the Church, after much agonising and debate, had agreed a formula of words which everyone accepted. Change could not be made without everyone agreeing.

The Patriarch of Constantinople focussed on the fact that the Western Church, centred on Rome, HAD made a change to the creed without the universal agreement that was essential. The change appeared small, but it was the principle that mattered. The Western Church had departed from the agreed formulation

and, therefore, had departed from the unity that has been so hard won.

The change started very early, The Nicene creed has been amended and finally agreed at a great Council of Constantinople in 381AD. However within fifty years, the Western Church had made an alteration. The change originated in what is now France but spread and became widely accepted in the West. The Nicene Creed included the words – I believe “in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father”. The words ‘proceeds from the Father’ was inserted in 381AD although it was not there in the original 324AD creed and comes from the Gospel of John Chapter 15 verse 26. The western Church added the words ‘...and the son’ so that the creed was revised to read: I believe ‘... in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son’. The position appeared perfectly reasonable. The Arians had held that the Father pre-existed the Son and created the Son, but if this was rejected (as it had been) then it seemed reasonable to hold that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son together. However this is to miss the point. The Eastern Church was adamant that NO change could be made in the agreed formulation of Christian belief without acceptance of ALL the Christian bishops at a universal Council. The Western Church has made such a change and was, therefore, guilty of heresy.

In 864AD, therefore, the leader of the Eastern Church, the Patriarch of Constantinople, accused the Western Church of heresy. There were political overtones here as well. Rome was weak and the Eastern Church was asserting its strength, but it held that it had a good basis for doing so. In 867AD the Western Pope, Pope Nicholas, was excommunicated by the Patriarch of

Constantinople. Tensions between West and East increased and culminated in the greatest split in the history of Christianity. The great split took place between Eastern and Western Christians in 1054AD. This was the biggest divide in the history of Christianity and it built on increasing tensions between the West and the East.

Various attempts had been made to resolve the conflict and, on both sides, there was real reluctance for a split. It must be remembered that communications at the time were very slow. Legates had to be sent to speak in the name of their masters and sometimes these legates exceeded their powers. This may well have happened in Constantinople. Three legates were sent by the Pope Leo with powers to negotiate a settlement but also the power to act in the Popes name. They went to the Patriarch of Constantinople but they were rude and almost certainly exceeded their authority. Pope Leo died on April 19 1054 and, with his death, the authority of the legates he had sent ceased. However the legates took no notice and continued to act effectively on their own authority and on July 16 they acted. They entered the wonderful church of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople during Divine Liturgy on a Saturday afternoon and placed a Papal Bull of Excommunication on the altar. This excommunicated the whole of the Eastern Church. It was an extraordinary event.

The Patriarch of Constantinople was popular and considered to be a holy man. He had great support and he, in turn, excommunicated the Western Church. The split was complete and it still with us. In the East of Europe the Orthodox Church is dominant centred in Constantinople whereas the Western Church

is centred on Rome. The Eastern Church considered that it acted on principle and would argue that the Western Church has continued to impose new teachings without the authority of the united Church. Examples would include the declaration by the First Vatican Council in 1870 that the Pope is infallible when promulgating certain doctrines – something never accepted by the Orthodox. In practice this power has only been used once, when Pope Pius X11 declared that all Catholic Christians had to accept, as a matter of faith, that Mary was assumed directly into heaven.

The Orthodox Church emphasises the autonomy of individual bishops and Patriarchs. The Patriarch of Constantinople is considered to be ‘primus inter pares’ or first among equals among Patriarchs of the Eastern Church. He is not considered to have authority over other Patriarchs. Many Orthodox theologians would have no difficulty in accepting that the Pope is effectively the supreme Patriarch but would deny him authority over the rest of the Church and would demand that the Western Church revert to obedience to the teachings of the early Church as put forward in the Council of Nicaea.

The Western Christian Church continued to develop in power and influence. Islam posed a real challenge in the ninth and tenth century. The Islamic armies had conquered the whole of North Africa and invaded Spain, conquering almost the whole of the country. They were gradually driven back by Christian forces before the twelfth century. Europe now entered a time of conflict between nation states but also of relative stability. In the west, the authority of the Church in Rome was undoubted. Almost everyone was a Christian.

Between the political intrigues, the battles between nation states and the increasing power and authority of the Western Church centred on Rome, the ordinary life of Christians went on. The message that Jesus preached of love and forgiveness, of resurrection and hope continued to be preached and was widely accepted. As the Church grew powerful there were, as in any human institution, those who were corrupt and who sought power for their own ends. But these were constantly challenged by those who recalled the Church and Christians to fidelity to the gentle but demanding message preached by Jesus.

A good example of this was an extraordinary man born in 1181AD – Francis di Bernardone. Francis came from the city of Assisi at a time when the modern Italy did not exist. There were city states which fought each other on a regular basis. Francis came from a wealthy family and his father was a rich cloth merchant. In many ways he was like any other rich young man. He enjoyed parties and bright clothing, but there was another side to his character. He was selling cloth in the market of Assisi on behalf of his father when a beggar came and asked for alms. Francis emptied his pockets and gave the beggar everything he had – much to the amusement of his friends and the anger of his father.

In 1201 at the age of 20 he went off, like other young men from his city, to fight against the neighbouring city of Perugia. He was captured and kept a prisoner for a year, returning to Assisi in 1203. He resumed his carefree life but the serious side of his character was becoming more important to him. In 1204 he had a serious illness and this led him to begin to recognise more clearly the importance of the spiritual side of life. In 1205 he enlisted to fight for a neighbouring army but he had a profound spiritual

experience and felt more and more uncomfortable with the wild life led by his friends. He gave up his life as a soldier, returned to Assisi and began a life dedicated to prayer and seeking God as well as looking after the most terribly afflicted lepers. He went on a pilgrimage to Rome and has a profound religious experience in the Church of San Damiano when he felt Jesus speaking to him from a cross saying "Francis, Francis, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins". Francis thought this meant that he should repair the Church in which he was praying so he sold his horse and dedicated himself to helping the priest to rebuild the Church.

A few years later, in February 1209, Francis had an experience which changed his life. The sermon for the day was preached on the text of Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 10 verse 9 in which Jesus tells his disciples that they should go out into the world, preach the coming of God's kingdom, call people to repent of their sins and take nothing with them, not even a staff or stick. Francis felt he has received a great revelation and decided to take this seriously. He decided to devote himself to a life of radical poverty and service. This was to be the basis of his life and his gentleness, love of everyone he met no matter how mean, diseased and despisable was to transform the Church.

Francis of Assisi (for so he was to become known) decided to dedicate his whole life to God and to those who were poor and had nothing. He was not an academic or a scholar, but he knew his bible well and took seriously Jesus' command to care for those in prison, those who were poor and outsiders. This was his task – to care for all those whom society derided and rejected from the lepers to robbers, prisoners and others. What was more, his

absolute commitment to poverty was disturbing to a Church which had become committed to wealth and power and for him a hierarchy of power seemed to be normal. The example of Francis influenced others and men came to join him attracted by his gentleness and his commitment to God and the service of others.

The Church at the time of Francis was powerful. Monasteries were rich and Bishops built palaces for themselves and all too often the simple Christian message was ignored. Francis realised that the vision he has received of Jesus in the Church of St. Damiano calling on him to 'rebuild the house' of Jesus referred not, as he thought at the time, to the little Church in which he prayed but to rebuild the very fabric of the Church as a whole. In a way Francis was a revolutionary, challenging all that the Church stood for in terms of power, influence and money, but he was also a faithful servant of the Church. He went to the Pope in Rome in 1209 with his first followers and he must have cut a disturbing figure amidst the wealth and pomp of the papal court. He asked permission from the Pope to form a religious order and, although initially reluctant, the Pope gave his assent on April 16 1209. Francis and his hundreds of thousands of subsequent followers have always been loyal servants of the Church but have also constantly returned the Church to Jesus' simple message of love and service to suffering humanity.

Francis chose not to be ordained as a priest and his followers were called 'Friars minor' as they did not initially accept the office of priest still less of Bishop. They were absolutely committed to poverty and service in a radical manner. In the same year as he went to Rome, Francis was preaching in his home city of Assisi and one of the congregation was a young women called Clare.

After the sermon she realised her vocation and, with Francis' blessing established a woman's religious order which became known as the 'poor Clares' following in the spirit of St. Francis.

In 1219 the Christian crusaders were fighting Muslims in Egypt. Francis went to Egypt with a group of his followers and crossed the battle lines to see the Sultan. Most people must have thought he was mad – crossing the lines of fierce battle to go to the enemy who were demonised by most of the Christian community and who Christians saw themselves to be fighting in Jesus' name. However the Sultan received Francis courteously and, so the story goes, he challenged the Muslim courtiers to a test of faith through fire. He said he would be willing to enter a raging fire first if, should he come out unharmed, the Sultan would embrace Christianity. The Sultan refused but was so impressed that he gave Francis safe passage back to the Christian lines and asked Francis to pray that the Sultan might be given the wisdom to discern where true faith lay.

It was Francis who first produced a nativity scene which is so familiar today with the baby Jesus in a manger surrounded by animals, Mary and Joseph and others. His simplicity, gentleness and goodness transformed the lives of everyone he met and has left an indelible legacy.

Tensions, however, continued to arise and dissent groups within Christianity became vocal. One such group was the Cathars in South West Spain. The Cathars were dualists – they saw the world as evil and they believed that the task was the return to the source of all being, the light that was within every person. They accepted the world but considered themselves to be strangers in the world. They lived lives of simplicity and love and their

influence grew very rapidly. They rejected many of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and went back to a position which has been condemned by the Church in the early years after Jesus, effectively Manichaeism. The Pope and the authorities in Rome considered this to be a threat and, in 1208 called for a Crusade to suppress the Cathars. The word 'crusade' is generally associated with Christian armies attempting to take control of Jerusalem from the Muslims, but this Crusade was Christians against Christians. It was the attempt to smash, to obliterate and to eliminate what was seen as a powerful and appealing heretical movement. At the time, France as we know it today did not exist and South West France south of Toulouse was effectively independent. The Crusading forces swept down and destroyed Carcassonne, Toulouse and much of the surrounding area. Tens of thousands were killed and what was seen as a false belief was suppressed in a brutal manner – the last Cathar was burned in a tiny village in the mountains called Villerouge Terme. It was at this time the Inquisition was formed to enforce compliance with Orthodox belief – heretics were tortured in an incredibly brutal manner and burnt to death. It was one of the worst blemishes on the record of the Christian Church as the Cathars were gentle, loving people who sought only to serve God. However their beliefs were seen as a threat to orthodoxy and the Church felt that they had to be brutally repressed. It was a sad and unhappy time for Christians and one that it is right for Christians to feel ashamed about. Christianity has not always been a force for good and the suppression of the Cathars was a particularly bloody and ignoble part of history.

The whole of Europe was Christian in the thirteenth century and the power of the Church affected every aspect of life. Rome was

as powerful as any king and, indeed, more powerful than most. The Church controlled every aspect of life and also controlled the gates of heaven and hell. The Church had long taught that, after death, souls went to heaven or hell, but there was a third possibility which applied to most Christians – this was that souls would go to an interim place called purgatory where the sins they had committed in life would be purged. St. Augustine held that the fires of purgatory would be more terrible and painful than anything endured in life. Everyone who went to purgatory would eventually get to heaven but a Christian could spend thousands of years in purgatory being punished or cleansed from the sins they had committed. The Church could, however, grant absolution from these sins and reduction of the time in purgatory. This could be achieved in various ways but they involved penance, rejecting sin and doing good works which could include paying money to the Church. This gave rise to the practice of selling indulgences. In words in return for payments to the church, the Church would grant release from a period of suffering in purgatory. The impact on this on faithful people is easy to imagine. If one imagines oneself in this medieval world with death approaching, then to pay money to the Church could ensure freedom from or reduction in punishment after death. The Church and Bishops became rich, the power and influence of the Church increased, – but not in the way St. Francis wanted. The Church was seen by some to have become identified with the interests of those in power and to no longer stand for the values that Jesus preached.

Against this a group of Christians protested – and for this reason they became called Protestants. As ordinary people increasingly began to be able to read the Bible for themselves, so they were

able to compare the message of Jesus recorded in the Bible with the power, wealth and influence of the Church. An increasing number of people began to feel that the message in the Gospels was not the same as what they saw proclaimed by the church and they began to question. This was combined with general improvements in education and the beginning of a role for scientific enquiry. Copernicus has challenged the accepted wisdom of the Church which held, following Aristotle, that the earth was the centre of the Universe and all the stars and planets revolved in circular orbits round the earth. Galileo took this challenge further. There were, therefore, a whole series of interconnected events which meant that the Church authority began to be questioned. Out of the period of rapid social and intellectual change came the Reformation.

Chapter Eight

THE REFORMATION

The greatest divide in Christianity happened, as we have seen, in 1054 with the split between the West and the East. More serious, however, in terms of the long term fragmentation of Christianity was the reformation. Many factors came together at the same time which provided fertile ground for the reformation to take hold. Three of these have already been referred to: the translation of the Bible into local languages from Latin, the invention of the printing press which meant that Bibles were freely available and new developments in scientific enquiry. However there were also broader social changes with the development of an increased middle class, education that was more widely available and the old authorities were challenged and people developed a new sense of freedom. However these merely provided the right circumstances for the Bible to do its work – the Bible, read by ordinary people, now became the yardstick for defining what Christianity was about.

Whilst almost every commentator will acknowledge the importance of the above factors to the reformation, there is another one that is often ignored – and that is the importance of the Franciscan movement. As we saw in the previous chapter, Francis of Assisi was not an academic. He took the Bible seriously and sought to live a Christian life based on this. His followers were poor and took poverty seriously – they challenged the wealth of the other great religious orders and their love for all human beings, their commitment to the teaching of Jesus and to

following Him closely had a profound influence. In many ways the Franciscan movement was to be a pre-cursor to the Protestant reformation. Whilst the Franciscans were faithful Catholics, they provided an example of a simple life style and the need to place the Bible at centre stage and these were to be features of the reformation.

This book may suffer from many weaknesses, but one of the most important is that it can appear to focus on the disagreements and splits within Christianity rather than the essential unity that lies beneath the surface tensions. There have been many disagreements and splits in Christianity and the Protestant reformed is one on the most significant but the Franciscan order, who has always been committed to the Roman Catholic Church, anticipated many of the challenges laid down by the early Protestants who were influenced by the Franciscans. The Franciscans took the Bible very seriously, as Protestants did, The Franciscans were critical of the wealth and power of the institutional Church, as the Protestants were and the Franciscans called people to live lives centred on the love of God and to show this love to everyone, as the Protestants sought to do as well.

There were various key figures who contributed to the Reformation and gave expression to the new understanding of Christianity, but none were more important than Wycliffe, Huss, Luther and Calvin.

John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe was born around 1325 and died in 1384. He was an English theologian and a student at Oxford. Whilst at Oxford he was strongly influenced by the great Franciscan writer, William of

Ockham. Wycliffe was a brilliant Biblical scholar and was one of the first to translate much of the Bible from Latin into the local language. He argued that the Bible should be supreme in the life of a Christian and challenged the power of the Pope and the Church. He argued that, in secular matters, the King should be supreme over the Pope and questioned the power and influence of the church. Wycliffe argued that the huge Church lands should be taken away and administered by civilians – he wanted the monasteries abolished as they were not recommended in the Bible and he argued that the huge landholdings of the monks should be given to the people. Not surprisingly, this view was strongly resisted by the clergy and the Monks who held vast land holdings and Wycliffe was accused of heresy. However his views were popular with ordinary people and in many cases viewed the power and money of the church in negative terms. Wycliffe was almost certainly influenced by the poor Franciscans who devoted their lives to poverty and the proclamation of the Gospel and he regarded the richness of the great religious orders as being incompatible with Christianity.

Wycliffe wanted to do away with the Church hierarchy and his message was spread across England by so called ‘poor priests’ who went out two by two. They lived a life of poverty, were not in religious orders and they preached the Gospel to the people. They wore dark red robes and carried a staff and Pope Gregory XI condemned them calling them ‘Lollards’ which was meant as an insult but because a badge of honour. They preached what they saw as God’s law which they claimed was the only basis for Christianity and which was firmly based on the Bible. One contemporary commentator said that towards the end of Wycliffe’s life, every second person in England was a Lollard.

Wycliffe's approach was very popular with ordinary people who had a deep sense that the Christianity proclaimed by the powerful and wealthy Church was not in accordance with the teaching of the Bible. His arguments had an effect and people stopped giving to the monastic orders and they lost much of their land – but instead of this land going to the poor, it tended to go to the Barons, Lords and the wealthy. This was not what Wycliffe intended.

Wycliffe challenged his opponents on the basis of the text of the Bible and argued that the Bible was God's revealed word and, therefore, should be the only authority. This was to be a fundamental principle of the Protestant reformation – that the Bible should take precedence over the teaching of the Church. Wycliffe challenged the power of the Pope in increasingly strident terms and came to regard the Pope as the source of evil. He rejected the power and hierarchy of the Church and saw them as leading people away from the message of Jesus. Wycliffe argued that there was no need for a Pope in Rome. The Christian community might need a leader but this should be someone who most closely follows Jesus and His message. God, as Trinity, is present everywhere and it is God who is the real leader of the Church, not the Pope.

In spite of the influence that Wycliffe had in his lifetime, this influence declined after his death. The Power of the Church remained strong, and it was in Europe that Wycliffe's greatest legacy remained – particularly through the work of John Huss.

John Huss (1372 – 1415)

Huss was twelve years old when Wycliffe died. King Richard of England married Anne of Bohemia and they travelled to Bohemia and took Wycliffe's ideas with them. Huss adopted Wycliffe's ideas and set out to reform the Church in Bohemia on the lines set out by Wycliffe. Hus argued that indulgences were un-biblical and were a means of the Catholic Church increasing its wealth. He also rejected the ability of the Pope or Bishops to call for people to take up arms (the crusades were obviously in his mind). The correct response was to follow the teaching of Jesus and prayer for enemies not to fight them. In 1412, three of Huss' followers who had condemned the practice of the Church selling indulgences were beheaded and tensions rose further between the many followers of Hus and the Church.

The Catholic Church was going through a difficult time as there were two rival Popes – both of whom rejected the other. These two Popes were Pope Gregory X11 and Pope Benedict X111 based in Avignon in France. Nevertheless it was clear that Huss' ideas expressed a deep challenge the Catholic doctrine and, as might be expected, the Catholic Church considered Huss to be putting forward heretical teachings and he was excommunicated (excluded from the Church) in 1411. In 1409, in an attempt to end the papal schism, the Council of Pisa met to elect a new, single pope. Unfortunately this attempt to restore unity failed and the pope they elected, Alexander V was not able to end the loyalty of difference sections of the Catholic Church to the other two popes. In 1409, Pope Alexander V condemned Wycliffe and all his works and all his books were burned and anyone preaching his eyes was excommunicated (subsequently the Catholic Church

has rejected Alexander and no longer considers him to have been a valid Pope). Public riots in support of Hus took place and the government attempted to support Huss as he was very popular but the power of the Church prevailed. He was put on trial (having first been promised safe passage but this was then renegade), he was not allowed a legal defence and was condemned, humiliated, degraded and then burnt in the stake on 6th July 1415. This is still celebrated as a public holiday in the Czech Republic. His last words were reputed to be: "God is my witness that I have never taught that of which I have by false witnesses been accused. In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached, I will die today with gladness."

His followers split into two groups – the Hussites (there is still an active Hussite Church in the Czech Republic) and the Taborites. The latter were more extreme and rejected the Roman Catholic Church because, they argued, it was not founded on the Bible. The Taborites were to found a group called the Moravian Brethren in 1450 and this group expanded into Germany and formed one of the first Protestant Church communities. These sent out more missionaries than any other Protestant group and it was missionaries from the Moravian Brethren who were later to convert John Wesley.

Martin Luther (1517-1546)

Many who have not studied the history of Christianity see Martin Luther as the founder of Protestantism. Although the influence of Luther cannot be exaggerated, as we have seen above there were major figures before Luther who anticipated much of what he was to teach. The Franciscan religious order called for a simple version of Christianity dedicated to love of God and neighbour,

Wycliffe and Huss rejected the authority of the Pope, condemned indulgences and proclaimed the primacy of the Bible.

Luther became an Augustinian monk in 1505 – he was thus firmly in the Catholic tradition and had studied St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham as well as other key figures. Luther committed himself wholeheartedly to his chosen vocation by fasting, constant prayer and going on pilgrimages but the more he tried to please God, the more conscious he was of his own sinfulness and the further he felt from God. He had no feeling of God's love in this period but only of God's judgement. He received his doctorate in 1512 and became a member of the theology faculty of the University of Wittenberg in the same year. Luther came to be suspicious of reason and, because of this, to be suspicious of Natural Theology which was based on Aristotle. He saw value in reason for developing human knowledge but considered that it could have little part to play in Christianity or in knowledge of God. Revelation was the only way that God could be known and, for this, the Bible was central. During these years Luther gradually came to feel that not just monastic life but the whole understanding of theology and the role of the Roman Catholic Church of which he had sought to be such a faithful member was mistaken.

In 1517, 12 years after Luther entered the monastery, the Pope sent an emissary, Johann Tetzel, to Germany to sell indulgences. The Pope badly needed money to build the magnificent basilica of St. Peters in Rome and Tetzel was charged with raising this money. The Catholic Church argued that it had been given authority by Jesus to decide who went to Heaven and to Hell but, more important, had been given authority to let people off

time in purgatory. Purgatory is held, by the Catholic tradition, to be a place of cleansing or punishment for sins committed in this life. Souls could spend thousands of years being cleansed or punished and St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the pains in purgatory exceeded any pains that could be experienced on earth. Anyone who went to purgatory would eventually achieve the Beatific Vision of God but, in the meantime, their suffering would be prolonged and terrible. The church taught that, by paying money to the church, the time in purgatory could be reduced or eliminated. If, therefore, a person was wealthy and nearing death it was very appealing to donate their money to the church to get time off purgatory. As Johann Tetzel is meant to have said: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs". Luther strongly objected to this and said that forgiveness belonged to God alone – this was the beginning of his attack on the authority of the Pope and the Church.

Luther condemned the practice of Confession before a priest which was, of course, associated with the forgiveness of sins and hence, indirectly, with the sale of indulgences. He was strongly in favour of asking God for forgiveness but this could be done by each individual and did not require a priest as an intermediary. Faith in God, he held, was a gift and this resulted in good works. Luther is sometimes quoted as advocating 'faith not works' but this is too simple – he was stressing that faith came first. All human beings were sinners and they needed to accept the grace of God and the love of God. Only once they had done this would good works come – good works, charity, compassion and love were essential for the Christian but these were the natural outworkings of faith they did not lead to faith. Acceptance of forgiveness by God and relying wholly on the grace and love of

God was essential – human beings could not ‘earn’ God’s grace by being virtuous. Grace and love was a free gift of God which needed to be accepted and acceptance of this love would then change peoples’ lives and result in good works.

Possibly the most important of all of Luther’s theological claims was that of justification by faith. Luther argued that salvation is not earned – it is God’s free choice to save some people through God’s grace. It was not a matter of a person working tirelessly to achieve goodness and thereby achieving salvation – rather it was the free gift of forgiveness, grace and redemption which led to salvation. This was a particularly attractive idea but it can seem to undermine the idea of human freedom. Human free will seems to be undermined on this view and God’s choice becomes decisive.

Luther translated the Bible from Greek into German and, whilst his was not the first translation, his became one of the most influential versions and, of course, this opened the Bible to ever more ‘ordinary’ people (i.e. not clerics who previously were almost the only people to be able to read the Bible since it was written in Latin).

Luther married – which was, of course, a breach of the vow of celibacy he has made when he became a monk. However Luther came to reject celibacy as some form of higher calling and he did so on Biblical grounds. He saw no Biblical basis for celibacy and saw both a married and an unmarried person as being equally capable to responding to the love, grace and forgiveness of God. Luther has six children by his wife, Katerina.

Emboldened by Luther and the reformers attacks on the Church and on Church property, there were a number of peasant’s

revolts protesting at the poverty in which ordinary people had to live compared with the wealth of both the aristocracy and the Church. Luther strongly opposed these revolts due to Jesus' saying that Christians should 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's'. Luther also condemned the peasant's revolt because violence was used and this, he claimed, went against Jesus' teaching. It is not easy to see Luther as a social reformer. Luther also strongly attacked the Jews and urged that they should be driven out of Germany. The Nazis were to quote Luther in support of their anti-Jewish policies although to what extent Luther's writings were to influence the later Nazis is disputed by scholars.

Luther's writings were widely circulated and he had enormous influence both in Germany but also further afield. By 1519 his books had reached England, France and Italy and everywhere they had a great impact as they appealed to what many ordinary people felt to be right. They saw the Church as associated with power and influence and did not feel it any longer reflected the message of the New Testament. In many ways the Protestant reformation has been the story of the history of Christianity with the institutional church becoming obsessed with power, money and control and ordinary people, as well as sometimes theologians and others, protesting against the Institution in the name of Christianity. These protests were not, therefore, against Christianity but precisely in the name of Christianity against what was seen as a distortion. Luther said that the Institutional Church constantly needs to be reforming itself – a lesson that the present Lutheran Church has not always taken to heart.

The Reformation, therefore, sought to return Christianity to its roots as proclaimed by Jesus in the New Testament and it has produced many different Churches across the world. The Anglican Church in Britain sought to maintain fidelity to the ancient teachings of the Catholic Church but also to accept many of the new insights of reformation thinkers. It therefore sees itself as a full part of the mainstream catholic Christian tradition although, because it does not see itself as being obedient to Rome, it is generally regarded as a Protestant church by most Catholics.