

# THE ALEPH COURSE.

## 7 : JESUS.

AND ABOUT TIME TOO .....

As Jesus, with God ( or, if you prefer it, Jesus as God ) is the central figure in Christianity, it must be admitted that to leave Him until well over half way through this series is a bit odd.

That's because I thought it important to introduce the background first.

And THAT's because I wanted to avoid introducing lots more assumptions in an uncontrolled way. The usual approach is to present Jesus as He's traditionally seen by the Bible, the church, and ( still at least a few of ) the theologians. This mixes Him up irrevocably with non-straightforward assumptions such as -

- He was born of a virgin;
- He died for our sins;
- He was restored to life after His death;
- He is the Son of God;
- He is God.

In the immortal phrase of the Pentagon, I shall neither confirm nor deny any of those. ( We'll say a bit more about the doctrines next time. ) That isn't because I don't believe them - for what it's worth, my views are not as simple as that - but only because they are NOT NECESSARILY CONVINCING, and to insist on them would require rather more suspension of disbelief than is comfortable.

So let's see how we get along without them.

IF, DESPITE ALL THAT, YOU HAVE TROUBLE WITH ANY FOLLOWING ASSERTIONS, I URGE YOU NOT TO WORRY ABOUT IT TOO MUCH. JUST CARRY ON - THIS IS TOO IMPORTANT TO GIVE UP BECAUSE OF DETAILS, MANY OF WHICH ARE AT BEST QUESTIONABLE, AND PROBABLY NOT VERY SIGNIFICANT IN THE END.

WHO IS JESUS ?

- It seems that there is acceptable historical evidence that He really did live in the Palestine area around 2000 years ago, and was connected with a movement within Judaism ( the Jewish faith ) which developed into Christianity.
- He is believed, by Christians, to be the CHRIST ( one ANOINTED by God - with CHRISM ), expected by the Jews on the basis of prophecies written in the Jewish scriptures, now found in the Old Testament of the Bible.
- Certainly the Christian church started to grow rapidly after His death, believed to be by crucifixion, ostensibly for revolutionary activities.

Details of His life and activities come mainly from the four GOSPELS in the Bible.

- The SYNOPTIC gospels ( Matthew, Mark, Luke ) are largely similar, though not identical, and seem to have been written around 50 to 90 AD.
- The gospel of JOHN, written between 90 and 100, which contains a significant amount of different material.

( Why so late ? It is suggested that the early Christians believed that He would return quite soon, and that event would signal the end of the time and the final judgment, so there wasn't much need for a permanent record. )

Other material comes from other writings in the New Testament, particularly many LETTERS from Christian leaders to various developing churches or individuals. Many of the letters are older than the gospels, but they don't present the same sort of narrative.

These sources are NOT ALWAYS IN COMPLETE AGREEMENT, though they are clearly dealing with the same ideas. ( That's what you might expect if they were written by people trying to express what they understood to the best of their ability. )

An example - IS JESUS HUMAN OR DIVINE ?

If you just read the BIBLE, the answer is not nearly as obvious as it's sometimes supposed to be. There are some passages where Jesus is described as claiming something like divine status, but not many. More often, He calls Himself "the son of man".

The THEOLOGIANS interpret that in many different ways. Interpretations I have seen include :

- That's code for "the Son of God", and would be so interpreted by the Jews of the time to whom He was speaking.
- It would be incomprehensible to the Jews of the time.
- It was intended to emphasise His humanity rather than divinity.

The CHURCH has offered statements such as that Jesus is "perfect Man and perfect God", which on the face of it is impossible.

So what IS the answer ? I suggest that

IT DOESN'T MATTER VERY MUCH.

- because once we start making dogmatic statements like that we immediately start to fight about them, and that's certainly not what He wanted. One thing which does come through from the gospels is that Jesus wasn't very concerned with theological details - but He was very concerned indeed with the practical details of living.

So, much more important is -

WHAT DID JESUS WANT ?

Curiously little ( if anything ? ) new - except a change in emphasis.

If you read the Old Testament, and the later books which protestants call the Apocrypha, you find that pretty well everything Jesus said is there somewhere. Perhaps the most striking example is this passage, which I think is worth quoting ( Matthew 22.35-40, New English Bible ) :

... the Pharisees met together, and one of their number tested him with this question :

'Master, which is the greatest commandment in the Law ?'.

He answered,

' "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind".

That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it :

"Love your neighbour as yourself".

Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments.'

The two quotations in Jesus's answer are both from the Old Testament - Deuteronomy 6.4,5 and Leviticus 19.18, respectively.

That is at the centre of the Christian message. In other places, Jesus said we should love our enemies, and ( speaking to the group of His disciples ) that we should love one another. This is where my second axiom came from ( back in talk 3 ).

It seems to me that :

- When the church has done that, even a bit, it has flourished ( though its membership has not necessarily increased );
- When it hasn't, it has dwindled ( though its membership has not necessarily decreased );
- Even when the theologians have been dancing angels on needle points, and the bishops have been playing power politics, there have been insignificant people - laity, parish priests - still doing what they could to live the gospel of Jesus. And I think *that's* why the church is still here.

It is a quite simple message. It doesn't seem to me that it needs a lot of theology to work out what it means, or to interpret it for our present day conditions. ( We might need a linguist to find a new word for "love" as the old one gets tarnished - like "charity" before it. )

That's not to say that theology is useless, or shouldn't be done. I can't judge that.

*It is* to say that we should beware of theological requirements that we jump through complicated hoops before we can be Christians; Jesus also spoke of the virtues of becoming like little children, and - while that is also open to all manner of interpretations - it suggests that the essence of Christianity must be simple. Like, for example, the piece above about love.

#### WHAT WAS JESUS TRYING TO DO ?

Jesus was a Jew. It seems clear that He saw His task as dealing with the Jews, and in particular as in urging them to redirect their religious attention away from an over-emphasis on minutiae of the law ( as developed by their theologians ), and towards a more caring and humane practice of the important principles ( see above ) in their daily lives.

So WHY ARE WE HERE ? We're not Jews.

It is by no means clear that Jesus ever intended to start a new religion. After His death, His followers continued to attend the synagogue worship, and preached the new way of Jesus in the synagogues. There was some expectation - perhaps hope ? - that Jesus would be "a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" ( Luke 2.32 ), suggesting an expansion of Judaism rather than a split.

Because the expansion is all part of the same process. In many places in the Old Testament, all the nations are seen as learning from the Jews, though it seems that the Jews had never regarded that as part of their job.

So perhaps there's a sense in which we really are Jews.

But there are many of us who don't follow Jesus, and don't love one another, and put theology before love. So the split from Judaism, and the expansion, came in the early Christian church after Jesus's death. It's tempting to see this split as the first in the history of the Christian church, and we've been splitting enthusiastically ever since as theology has triumphed over love time and time again.

And we have persecuted the Jews, just as we have persecuted each other, because we are always too fond of our doctrines to listen to what Jesus said.