

Abingdon Day Conference : Lets Be Honest!

Honest about Jesus, the Church and God

11am Honest about Jesus

I am not going to begin with God. Jack Spong has wished that we ban the word God for a thousand years. And my reason for ending and not beginning with God is simply back to context. Most of us will have come to an understanding, a view about 'God' through our own cultural inheritance. I have recently visited Sri Lanka as part of my diocesan work and there, in that predominantly Buddhist country you can go from Buddhist Temple to Hindu temple to Mosque to Christian church as easily as you could go shopping in Abingdon at all the different shops. And of course in a country where everybody has religion, everybody too has an understanding of God born out of their practice and beliefs. I cannot escape the fact that for me, as for all of us, my upbringing, my schooling, my society and culture have brought me to an understanding about God through the Judeo – Christian inheritance. Of course that is changing rapidly but for my generation God has been understood largely through the person of Jesus and the church's teaching about that Christian God. And so if I am going to be honest about God, I want to begin by being honest about Jesus.

Sitting on the window sill of my office are these two images of Jesus, which I deliberately keep next to each other. This is a gift from Russian friends in St Petersburg and is an iconic image of Jesus in the arms of his mother Mary. Jesus, with adult face, looks adoringly at the rather doleful Madonna. Such depictions of Jesus in the world's art galleries must number millions. Madonna and child, nativity, crucifixion and resurrection paintings understandably dominate the Christian art world. But the second image of Jesus on my window ledge is a postcard replica of a painting by Max Ernst. I saw the original whilst holidaying with a German friend in Cologne and just had to buy the postcard. In 1926 Ernst created *'The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses: A.B. P.E., and the Artist'*, to give the painting its full title. A muscular Mary is spanking the infant Jesus whilst the artists Breton, Eluard and Ernst look on. In stature, Jesus looks more like a seven year old; his halo is on the ground. The archbishop of Cologne at the time denounced this icon of surrealism as a 'blasphemous narrative'. For how could a sinless Christ be spanked?

These two images of Jesus remind me of that search for the 'real' Jesus, which, in a way, has been happening from the time when Jesus called his disciples to join with him in his mission. In the earliest of the canonical gospels, Mark has Jesus putting this question before his disciples, 'Who do people say I am? (Mark 8.27) It's a question which the New Testament writers and others sought to answer in the first couple of centuries after the death of Jesus.

So who is this Jesus? Is he the sinless Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, declared to be the world's Saviour and Redeemer by the councils and creeds of the early Church? Or was he a human being, like you and me, whose halo could slip, a remarkable prophetic man of his time and for his time? Or could he have been both? Or is Jesus whatever we want him to be – a personal saviour, an exemplar of justice and compassion, a God presence in our lives, a name to swear by?

Many books have been written attempting to give an overview of the search for the historical Jesus. Such books summarise a journey from the Renaissance, through the Reformation and on to the Enlightenment and the modern critical scholarship which continues to this day. One of the more recent and helpful summaries of this quest is given by Professor James Dunn in

his book *Jesus Remembered*, published in 2003. Alongside an analysis of the work of historians and theologians, Dunn also adds to the complexity of our task by asking who Jesus thought he was and how Jesus saw his own role. An earlier publication by Lion Publishing, *The Jesus Debate* by Mark Allan Powell (1998) also gave a very accessible summary of this quest and is worth sourcing. Recently Maurice Casey has written this *Jesus of Nazareth* (2010) which I have found both compelling and convincing.

In the words of James Dunn, Jesus will always be someone 'remembered' and the challenge is to get to grips with all the evidence, the memories, the tales, the stories and sayings, so that we might arrive at a point when we can say that in our honest opinion this is who we think Jesus was. Honesty will be at the heart of this search.

I am excited in this honest searching by the opportunity to 'meet Jesus again for the first time' to quote the popular work by Marcus Borg. Thanks to the work of historians and others we can rediscover a Jesus who can be and is, an inspiration to people, a Jesus by whom the Church and Christians can be shaped and formed, a Jesus who leads us further to be honest about God, the bible and the Church itself. But such a discovery will need a sea change by the Church in its doctrines and its worship as they relate to Jesus Christ. I am unsure if that is at all possible.

So for now I offer this foundational analysis, an honest picture of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was an influential Jewish teacher, living in Roman occupied Lower Galilee at a time of increasing economic hardship for his fellow Jews. Influenced by the charismatic preaching of the Baptist, Jesus went on to attract a band of followers; he preached a Judaism which focused on striving for God's impending Kingdom, which he constantly described in parables. His religion was wholly theocentric, God-centred, in which he, Jesus, played the 'man of God' par excellence. It was towards God, the heavenly Father, our Father, that Jesus directed his and others' prayers and supplications. Borg describes Jesus as being a lens on to God, always pointing not to himself, at least in the Synoptic gospels, but to God. Jesus showed immense compassion for people, not exclusively Jewish, he seemed to have a particular bias to the poor and the unloved, a particular regard for the young, in his presence there was a sense of being made whole; he was an excellent story teller who knew his Hebrew scriptures. He was angry, as was many a Jew, at the collusion of the Temple with the Roman power. He seems to have deliberately set himself on a path of confrontation with the Jerusalem Temple authorities and an incident in the Temple meant that he was quickly executed by crucifixion by Pilate. His message of love, compassion and forgiveness inspired his followers to continue to work for God's kingdom on earth, expectant though they were, of the imminent judgement of God, intervening for his people. Jesus didn't go around speaking of himself as Son of God but in a short time after his death the early Christians, the followers of the Way, spoke of him as the Christ of God, as Lord and Saviour.

Most Christians, I guess, would agree with this description, with these broad brushstrokes. But of course for most Christians it would not only be incomplete but incoherent because it does not refer to a greater theological narrative about Jesus. That is to say a kind of doctrinal garment, which is wrapped around this description. Borg calls this the Post Easter Jesus of Christianity. The wrapping as you know would look something like this : Jesus was the preexisting Son of God sent by the Father as the Word incarnate, born of the Virgin Mary, a God Man who performed miracles, including nature miracles, which attested to his divinity. His death on the Cross was God's way of restoring fallen humanity through Jesus' own atonement for our sins and through the power of God was raised from earthly death and

exalted to God in heaven. Moreover this Jesus will return from heaven to finally judge humankind at the general resurrection. The stuff of creeds and catecheses.

Between these two portraits, one you might call the likely historical core and one the larger picture, which may or may not contain any historical verification, can we ever agree on a Jesus shaped God or Church?

This is difficult territory and we know there is a range of views over the very understanding of the Bible, from hard line fundamentalism with its conviction of the bible's inerrancy to the highly critical assessment of the books of the bible as a human creation.

Lets look for agreement if we can. Take the birth stories of the Christmas narratives in Luke and Matthew. A modernist take on Christmas seems now generally supported by most serious scholars in understanding the Christmas narratives as theological and not historical constructs. I won't go as far as to say that no serious scholar believes in a literal birth story of Jesus, with attendant shepherds, wise men, angels etc. But take James Dunn, an esteemed and fairly conservative academic: On page 343 of 'Jesus Remembered' he writes

"Are there, then, no historical facts concerning Jesus' birth to be gleaned from the birth narratives? The prospects are not good." 'perhaps what we see most clearly in the birth narratives is diverse elaboration of the core conviction that Jesus was born of God's Spirit in a special way"

There is a consensus by most serious scholars that the birth stories are not historical fact at all. But have most churches and indeed most clergy been willing to be honest and clear about the Christmas stories?

How do we deal with those nature miracles performed by Jesus? Are they legendary tales to exalt the significance of Jesus or did such events as the stilling of a storm or the multiplication of bread and fishes really happen? And do we need to distinguish between metaphor and fact? Remember Crossan's remark that describing Jesus as the lamb of God did not mean that Mary had a little lamb. We continue to sing songs about Jesus who walks on water or stills a storm but what do we understand as we sing these hymns? And what kind of a God does this portray? An interventionist God who controls the weather? A capricious God who sends floods and tsunamis and drought?

The most common of the actions of Jesus were the healings as recorded in the gospels and later in the book of Acts. This is a difficult area. The healing ministry of the Church is still very much central to its life. We may try to explain away such miraculous healings and exorcisms through a modern day understanding of science and medicine. But do even progressive people, who have some belief in a 'God' wish to deny the possibility and occurrence of such healing? Marcus Borg lays considerable stress on the healing ministry of Jesus. In his major work on Jesus, Borg says this about healings:

"To attempt to explain how these healings happened is beyond our purpose and probably impossible.a psychological explanation doesn't work as a comprehensive explanation.....within the thought world of the synoptic stories, Jesus' healings were the result of 'power'. 'Jesus's exorcisms were also the result of the power of the Spirit'.

Progressive Christians and conservative believers clash over an understanding of the death of Jesus. For the majority of Christians still, notions of salvation and blood sacrifice are central.

Jesus atones for the sins of the world. Substitutionary atonement appeases a wrathful God. Sin gets everywhere in our liturgies and prayers. Radicals claim that this is bad history and bad theology. It is bad history because it presumes that God planned the death of Jesus when one can account pretty well for why his execution took place. It was human inevitability and not a divine necessity. In his own way, Jesus challenged the domination system of Rome and Temple. It was this passion for the kingdom of God, for the rule of Jahweh, which got him killed. Jesus died **because** of the sins of the world, not **for** them in any substitutionary sense. Penal substitution is simply bad theology because no Jew or Christian until St Anselm would dream up such a notion of the God of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Whilst many views on atonement and indeed salvation remain, I sense however, and I don't think this is just wishful thinking, a growing unease, even within evangelicalism, with penal substitution and blood sacrifice notions. Being honest about Jesus might then be able to understand the death of Jesus in ways which help 21st century folk, as we think about the confrontation with evil, the self sacrifice which people make.

But the ultimate challenge in our search for an honest life of Jesus is how then do we understand the Resurrection?

For some Christians like Spong the resurrection is largely explained in a kind of gradual awakening to a new dimension of reality rather than a one off physical event. Many scholars, I guess, dismiss the idea of physical resurrection and empty tomb – remember famously David Jenkins – and emphasise the visionary experiences of Paul and others which gave rise to this testimony. Borg talks of the reality of a vision of Jesus, imparting a sense of presence to his followers; Crossan says Emmaus keeps happening. They stress an ongoing sense of continuing empowerment. I find that this is difficult to distinguish from simply saying that the spirit of God empowers people, even though Jesus is dead. 'Jesus is Lord' can become a phrase, a creed, indicative of a determination to continue the kingdom work of Jesus. Yet for the vast majority in our churches, the resurrection of Jesus has an objective reality of some kind, be it a physical resurrection from the tomb or verifiable visions of a Jesus alive in a new way. So a Jesus shaped Church will need to speak about empowerment, of new beginnings but will it have anything to say of resurrection and eternal life? I recognize that the principle difficulty in reconciling conservative and radical will be the understanding of the biblical account of the Resurrection of Jesus.

What is undeniably true is that the conviction of the continuous presence of Jesus held by the disciples was for them real and empowering. They were prepared to go to their deaths in a pagan – run Empire in the cause of being in the Way of Christ. The Church was formed through such convictions. Did it need an empty tomb to ensure this ? I don't believe so. Did it need faith in a purposeful and powerful God? David Jenkins said those thirty years ago, the *'very life and power and purpose and personality which was in him (Jesus) was actually continuing and was continuing both in the sphere of God and in the sphere of history so that he was a risen and living presence and possibility.'*

So to sum up my Honest Jesus : I like Borg's phrase that Jesus is a lens onto 'God', a definitive disclosure of what God would be like if God were understood in human terms. Jesus demonstrated in word and deed how a man of God brings the Spirit, the power of God into the lives of people. That was his charisma, as it had been with prophets before him. The Jesus of the gospels reveals to me the fullness of a human life driven by a spiritual power, which is marked by a sense of anger at injustice, overwhelming compassion for all in need and seen in joy, love, grace and forgiveness; in short a man fully alive, revealing, in the words of Irenaeus,

the glory of God. This remarkable Jew, critical of his own Jewish hierarchy and Temple, profoundly influenced by the highest calling of his faith to love God and neighbour, transcended his own culture and showed radical hospitality and love beyond the boundaries of Jewish legalism. In this he was truly a boundary breaker. His presence and his teachings, his actions conveyed such a sense of power that people felt the presence of God, of Yahweh. This for me is how I see the incarnation – not in a God man performing nature miracles or spectacular feats – but as being a channel for divine love and compassion.

This is far removed from the creedal statements about Jesus and far removed from the likely views of the Texan senator, who when hearing that they were about to introduce the teaching of languages in Texan primary schools opposed the measure, saying that if English was good enough for Jesus it should be good enough for us.

Like Brian MacClaren, I do not wish to be a ‘vampire Christian’, recruiting Jesus for his blood to manage my sins. Rather I want Jesus to recruit me to be his disciple, that is, I want to have the same passions for the kingdom of God on earth as Jesus had. But it is the kingdom of God. This is the springboard for a passionate Christian community, the church.

12 noon Honest about the Church

Allow me to take a trip down memory lane in regard to the church and as I do so maybe it will resonate with you. This is the church where I was baptized as a baby, where Christine and I were married 36 years ago and where I shall be buried unless I am lost at sea.

This is my experience of church, growing up in the 1950's. Every Sunday I go to church and sit with the other boys in the right hand aisle, the girls sit in the left aisle. It's morning prayer, lots of sung canticles, a longish sermon. The service largely washes over me, I idle away the time by reading the Table of Affinity in my Prayer Book, : 'A man may not marry his daughter's son's wife' and so on. The service ended, I dash home for Sunday dinner. Dad will have gone to the corner shop for the Sunday paper, the only shop open. After dinner at 2pm I go to Sunday School in the large, decaying parish hall, the old Victorian church, now with its polished floor used on occasion for parish dances. They take the register, 'yes yes' means I have been to church in the morning as well as Sunday school in the afternoon. I am in line for a prize. There are no visual aids to the teaching, no powerpoint projection, no I pad graphics, just talk. At 3pm, after a final hymn we run out, we assail the toffee shop of Alice Ashurst, she opens specially for us. I was confirmed at 12 years of age, as were many of my friends at grammar school. Then gradually we peeled away from church and later explored the exotic religious menu available at university.

All of us could tell such a story of a Church, which, whilst it had steadily declined since arguably the First World War, nevertheless had a significant role to play in the community and in people's lives in the 1950's and the 60's. The church offered a sense of place and belonging. It was not odd to go to church, it was just what you did on Sunday. We took for granted the faith of the Church, we never thought to question, we said the creeds and sang the hymns but its real strength was in offering a narrative on life, a meaning to human existence, which made reference to Jesus of Nazareth and the God of the Christian faith. That God was a keeper of morals who cares for his sheep; the church did this through baptising, teaching, marrying and burying people. That God, the church told us, calls us to his heaven when our days were ended.

Today that church is still there but beneath the surface things have changed. Now very few children and young people go to church at all, let alone a Sunday School. So there is Messy Church, a Friday teatime gathering about once a month. There are few people who regularly attend that church under the age of 60. The baptisms which are conducted after the main service seem now to be occasions like a wedding, often a chance to have christening party. The weddings are declining as hotels and desert islands offer package deals. But the funerals remain, that hope for immortality, whatever that might mean. Soon the church might have to share its vicar with another church as congregations decline, very few people now attend evening prayer and the financial challenges are huge. Beyond the church, Sunday is very different. My dad would have no problem today in getting his Sunday paper, indeed our shopping malls and supermarkets are trading heavily. Parents are whizzing children around to soccer matches or swimming pools. Going to church has become a minority interest until Christmas comes around again and going to church is acceptable for that one time in the year.

That trip down the decades illustrates the huge differences in our way of life over the last 50 years. Today the mainstream denominational churches are facing meltdown in many countries in western Europe. The UK now has the fourth lowest rate of church attendance in Europe, only Hungary, France and Denmark are worse. Peter Brierley, former Head of Christian Research, paints a very gloomy picture of Church attendance in Britain in the

coming decades. The loss of young people is most alarming, over 80% of children under 15 now no longer attend church, whilst people in the 30 – 44 age range are attending less frequently because of the pressures of modern living. Whilst the mainstream churches continue to close churches, the immigrant African churches, mostly Pentecostalist in nature, thrive.

If we are honest in our portrayal of Jesus, what does this say to the churches? After the death of Jesus, the influence of Hellenistic thought and mysticism began to change the charismatic Judaism of Jesus and the budding Palestinian Christianity. The trend started with Paul and the Fourth Gospel and the impact of Platonic philosophy on the formulation of Christian theological ideas. The final thrust in this transformation came with the adoption of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine and the first ecumenical council held at Nicaea in 325, which solemnly proclaimed the divinity of Jesus.

Marcus Borg and many others remind us that the central issue is that the church constructed this Christianity, through its early Councils, to be a system of beliefs, of doctrines and dogmas shaped by the world of that first millennium. There were no heavenly 'truths' handed down from on high, only the machinations of men who constructed these dogmas, which may have been an authentic attempt to understand their world 1700 years ago but have long since proved to be inadequate. Christian faith was robbed of its central dynamic as a transforming experience of the God power which had so filled the person of Jesus and which is about transforming lives. This emerging, powerful and enforcing church seemed so often light years removed from the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Crusades, the wars against heretics across Europe, the violence and burnings of the Reformation, through to the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and terrorism of our own day, all have given religion a very bad press. With the renaissance of new learning, the medieval hold of religion began to break down. The excesses of the western Church of Rome sparked off the Reformation, which replaced Catholic dogma and control with a Protestant version. But it was to be the new learning which made for real change. Cupitt in his remarkable Sea of Faith TV programmes and the likes of Spong have amply shown how Newtonian physics, Copernican and Galilean discoveries about the cosmos all challenged the dogmas of religion. Historical critical analysis of the Bible from the 19th century onwards contributed to a sea change in our understanding and serious theology in our universities changed forever. Jumping forward to our own era the influence of theologians such as Tillich and Robinson's *Honest to God*, then the Myth of God Incarnate debate of the 1970's and the outspokenness of Bishop David Jenkins in the 80's kept the radical questioning voice alive. The Sea of Faith 'movement' dared give voice to the idea that the whole religious enterprise was to be seen as a social construct.

Atheistic scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins lead the assault on what many consider to be the dangerous irrelevance of religion and the church. Christianity seems to be under attack. Yet at the same time there is a sustained interest in matters of faith and spirituality. And so many theologians and church people try to rescue Christianity from its past and hence Jack Spong's copious output: 'Why Christianity Must Change or Die', 'A New Christianity for a New World', Brian McClaren, 'A New Kind of Christianity', Hilary Wakemen, 'Saving Christianity', Dave Tomlinson 'How to be a Bad Christian and a Better Human Being', and of course back in 1963 John Robinson's 'Honest to God'.

But I come in part today as a churchman, ordained all those years ago by David Sheppard and finding myself in different churches Sunday by Sunday from inner city to remote Dales village.

And I want to say that we must also recognize the contributions made by the Church down the centuries. Often it has tried to put the image of the Good Shepherd to the fore in so many areas of social betterment – the establishment of church schools, of hospitals and hospices. The Church is still seen as an institution offering certain rituals for the important times in human lives, joyful and sorrowful. Chaplains minister in prisons and detention centres, often dealing with the most demanding of human kind. The track record of the Church has many plusses. Indeed Don Cupitt in his book 'The Meaning of the West' attributes so much of the democratic and moral bases of life in western Europe to the influence of the Judeo-Christian religion. Cupitt ironically speaks of the God in Jesus coming on earth to show us how to live and now the God is dead and we must get on with living that kind of life. I paraphrase.

Many churches in their desire to emulate the teachings of Jesus work tirelessly for justice, for a more caring and compassionate society. Recently the Church has challenged payday lenders and is a powerful agent in the provision of food banks. This unites Christians of all traditions, although the difficult moral issues of marriage and divorce, the blessing of same sex unions still divide Christians.

How then may our churches be honest to that honest portrayal of Jesus?

Twelve years ago, Don Cupitt, in this book, 'Reforming Christianity', addressed the question of whether the reformation of Christianity was possible. At the same time Jack Spong was asking the same question in this book, published in the same year, 'A New Christianity for a New World'. Cupitt writes as a non realist, for whom God is a construct of the human mind and religion a construct needed by human beings. His central and uplifting argument is that now, the kingdom religion of Jesus, the Jewish teacher, is more interesting to people in general than the elaborate machinery of sacramentally mediated church religion. Of course the Free churches did, in part, turn their backs on the mediation of priests but for many the mediation of the holy book became the replaced absolute. But Kingdom religion, that message of Jesus, is, Cupitt says, religious immediacy, it is about 'God' being closer to the believer, about the world ruled by this God. Kingdom religion feels more authentic, more democratic, more personal. Kingdom religion speaks less about doctrines and dogmas and more about journeying and experiencing. The Quakers, the Anabaptists, the Sojourners and other Christian groups have exemplified this move towards Kingdom religion in different ways.

Cupitt takes much of the Kingdom teachings of Jesus seriously when they are able to frame an ethical basis for human behaviour and how we treat each other. Kingdom religion then would propagate liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, queer theology. Kingdom religion challenges militarism. These for Cupitt are all good solid Kingdom causes. The church for Cupitt provides the necessary theatre, the public space in which these causes are acted out. So at its best, the local church draws together, like any membership society, people who share common concerns, ideals, hopes for the kind of world where goodness, virtue, equality, peace, fairness, tolerance, love, all flourish. Christians might claim that these virtues relate to the fruits of the Spirit and to the power of God at work in human beings. Cupitt denies God as a metaphysical reality, discounts a Platonic view of the universe, the painted veil that hangs between us and an eternal world. Cupitt would rid us of ideas of heaven, that particular Kingdom has not and will not come he says. It is this world we have to live in and only this world; this life and only this life and the task is of solar living, that is when all life becomes a sacred continuum, God is scattered into everyone, all ethics becomes humanitarian, human conscience becomes globalised. If there is a task for religion, it is a communal way of reimagining and remaking the self and the world.

As an aside for a moment, last year saw the publication of a popular book by a popular writer Alain de Botton, called Religion for Atheists, in which Botton, not unlike Cupitt, appreciates so much of what religion has offered to society – its fine buildings, its art and music, its sense of sacred places, its moral virtues of kindness, pity, feelings of community, the rhythm and place of festivals and feasts. More to the point Botton writes :

“It is when we stop believing that religions have been handed down from above or else that they are entirely daft that matters become more interesting. We can then recognize that we invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day and which secular society has not been able to solve with any particular skill: first, the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses. And second, the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to professional failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise.”

So for Cupitt and Botton and indeed for many people of no religious commitment, the Jesus who walked this earth teaching about the Kingdom of God on earth, preaching a message of peace and forgiveness, of challenging the domination systems which oppress the weak and the poor, a man who upheld that global ethic of the Golden Rule, becomes a significant influence for good.

The desirability of some form of community, sharing Kingdom values, is also exemplified very recently in the ‘godless congregation’ Sunday Assembly which is opening in 20 cities around the world – meeting for song, contemplation, secular talks and community action.

Returning to Christian churches, many Christian writers who hold to some form of theism put forward arguments for ‘religionless Christianity’, to use Bonhoeffer’s phrase. I take this to mean a dismantling of so much of the supernatural canopy and allow that Spirit of God to be set free. Much of this vein of theological speculation of course can be seen in the work of Tillich and then Robinson in his ‘Honest to God’ book, which had such a profound influence on a whole generation. For these and many others the life and teachings of Jesus give us, as followers, a programme of radical discipleship, having the same passions to transform the lives of individuals and communities as prescribed in the Hebrew scriptures, with their macro themes of liberation, restoration and empowerment. Simply by looking at the chapter headings in Myers’ book you see the drift of the argument and the shaping of this Church : Jesus the Teacher, not the Saviour; Faith as Being not Belief; Easter as Presence, not Proof; Christianity as Compassion, not Condemnation; Religion as Relationship, not Righteousness; Original Blessing not Original Sin.

These progressive writers and thinkers question the orthodox view of the divinity of Jesus as traditionally understood in the creeds of the Church. Portraying a Man of God is not the same as talking about THE Son of God. Instead there is in part a degree Christology, implying that we all may experience the power of the divine in our lives, we are all children of God but that Jesus had a particular, an enhanced experience of such Godly power. Jesus becomes not the exclusive pathway to God but a decisive revelation of God, leaving open the possibility of other revelations of the Divine Wisdom.

From what I have said, a Jesus shaped church then, would have the following characteristics and be true to our honest understanding of Jesus:

1. A Church which is Passionate about Justice, Compassion, Love and Healing

No one would doubt that the Jesus of history was driven by an intense desire to be faithful to the Law and the Prophets of his Jewish scriptures, to return to a pure and authentic obedience to Jahweh, to live out a life personally and communally in accordance with the highest ideals of his faith. Such a life would be full of compassion, as God is compassionate, full of righteous anger against all that diminishes the image of God in others. Above all a Love for God and for neighbour, as much as one loves oneself.

Such a church would, as many do, place central concerns upon deep and sustained care for all who come its way and reaching out to all in need. Such a church would itself be a source of healing and wholeness through the grace of its members.

2. A Church which is Prophetic and Inclusive

Jesus not only seems to have been influenced by the Baptist but in his teachings and enacted parables seems to have broken down all kind of barriers – the divisions built around race and religion, status and honour, around gender and age. A church then shaped by Jesus would seek to include rather than exclude; a church which didn't follow conventions of status but rather exemplified the kingdom of nobodies. You only have to look at a procession in a great cathedral service – how clergy and others dress, the order in which they process to see a church embedded in hierarchy and status.

And this inclusive church will of necessity speak out on matters of injustice and all that disfigures our world today. Followers of Jesus will be in the vanguard and not the guards van when we address issues of peace and reconciliation, of ecology and environmental pollution. The Church has so often in its past and present led the way in social and political change – think of the nineteenth century opponents of slavery or of child labour. Think of examples of pioneering health and hospice care. But also recall how the Church can seem to drag its heels over other issues such as the place of women in its structures or the equality shown to gay and lesbian people. A Jesus Shaped Church would always seek to be the first to demand justice and equality for all people.

3. A Church which is Holy and Mediates the Sacred

A Jesus shaped Church in honouring the teachings and example of Jesus would also need to acknowledge that for Jesus a Presence known to him as the God of the Torah was the bedrock of all he did, and said and who he was. We can see the miraculous birth stories as theology and not history, the nature miracles too as metaphorical narratives, many of the healings and exorcisms as belonging to a superstitious and pre scientific world. We can debate the nature of the Resurrection experience of the disciples and place the Ascension in the category of legend. But what of the Sacred, the holy, the 'More', the Presence, what of spirituality and prayer, of meditation and silence? In other words can people find 'God' and not the man up in the sky in a Jesus shaped church?

As human beings we need ways in which we are nourished, ways in which our whole being feels to have come alive to the person we are. The path of spiritual enlightenment, of mystical experience, that which Tillich wrote of as the 'Ground of All Being', that authentic experience of the sacred which is common to all great religious traditions will be part of a Jesus shaped church. It might take as its starting point the life of Jesus but will also be open to the spiritualities of the Age.

In such a Church prayer will be less the petitioning of an external deity, but an experience of the power of the Presence of God at work in the praying, yearning community.

4. A Church which blesses all of life, is a blessing to the community.

A Jesus shaped Church would seek to be with people at the points in their lives when rituals of blessing, the sharing of joys and sorrows are so important. The 'hatched, matched and despatched' offices of the Church are still important for many people - the bringing a child for baptism, being married or holding a funeral service. Jack Spong reminds us in his book *A New Christianity for a New World*, that the ecclesia of tomorrow will continue to hold ritual acts, which mark these transitions in human life. The ritual act of welcome and the symbolism of water remind us of the wonder bringing forth of new life but we need to shed ideas of original sin. Marriage offers the opportunity to enter deeply into the shared experiences of love and commitment and needs to be celebrated for any couple, whatever their gender. And a funeral service will unashamedly rejoice at the person's life and human worth, will engage deeply with the experience of loss and be honest about hope for the ultimate journey of the human soul rather than the dishonest certainties of a heaven and hell universe. All of this implies a community of people sharing in each others' joys and sorrows.

5. A Church which offers a thoughtful journey of questioning and discovering.

How can we ever know all there is to know about life and its purposes , about God and God's meaning and yet the Church has been so used to presenting a faith which seems all wrapped up with no need to question or doubt. But the Jesus I meet in the gospels is one who asks his followers to think, to laugh, to see irony, to be tested. Jesus spent three years taking risks, speaking out against the establishments of his day, choosing a less travelled path. I want a church to invite me on a journey of exploration. I don't want a Back to Church Sunday initiative. I want a come and journey with us Sunday. I want a church where we explore the Bible and ask How is this the Word of the Lord for us today?

These then would be some of the characteristics of a Jesus shaped Church, a Church fit for this 3rd millennium.

1.45pm Honest about God

And finally to God. Let me tell you a story, totally apocryphal but instructive. It is harvest time and we are in one of our Church of England primary schools in the Yorkshire dales. A kind allotment holder with a surfeit of apples has left a bag of them at the school for the children to have an apple with their lunch. A rather severe school cook places the apples at the end of the servery with a note : Only take one apple- remember God is watching. But there's a cheeky and clever young pupil who scribbles another note, this time on the plate of chocolate biscuits also laid out for the school lunch. That note says, Take as many of these as you wish. God is watching the apples.

For thousands of years and across many of the worlds religions, God or the gods have been watching us mortals from on high. These Gods are like us in that they think and act, they have feelings and moods. Sometimes they come to earth, they even make love to humans or disguise themselves in various forms. We mortals, conscious of our frailty, turn to them for protection, we try to appease them when in anger they send storms or earthquakes. We praise them when our harvest is abundant, we ask what have we done wrong when we suffer tragedy.

Our Christian faith began its journey thousands of years back when a small tribal people in the Middle East saw their survival, their liberation, through the good will of a God with whom they had a special relationship. Gradually they came to a belief that there was in fact only one God and in their writings they tried to understand their world through the telling of stories, and the propounding of myths and legends, which gave some kind of explanation of their world.

This god, Yahweh, came to be understood as a God not only beyond themselves, high and lifted up but also an intensely personal God who spoke to prophets, priests and kings. In the developing story of God in the Hebrew scriptures, came other developments of thought – about cosmology, about human ethics, about justice and the ordering of society. The world of our Jewish forebears was shot through with divinity, a God presence refined and defined over and over again.

Being honest about Jesus reminds us that this faithful Jew lived out his life, believing that this God permeated all that he did and said. And gradually a new religion emerged which spoke of a God who had come to earth, incarnated in this Jesus. For two thousand years the Church then, if we look honestly at its beliefs, held on to a paradox of a God both immanent and transcendent, a God who could be as close to us as a loving parent stroking our head and at the same time a God so beyond our imagining , immortal, invisible, incomprehensible.

Other Gods were around inhabiting our universe, various eastern deities, a God who revealed himself to a certain prophet called Mohammed who simply recorded in his Arabic language the words of that God, words which were to be the final Word for all time and all places. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and other religions seemed to survive and adapt rather better than Christianity or Judaism. For in the west we began to see philosophical and scientific challenges to faith in God. We saw from the Enlightenment onwards how biblical writings were subject to critical scrutiny. We have also considered how the search for the Jesus of history has unmasked much of the mystery of the so called incarnation. At the same time came a gradual Death of God philosophical endeavour.

The Age of Reason or Enlightenment, which followed those great cosmological discoveries concerning the movements of the Sun and the planets, saw the flourishing of empirical and rational thought. You know well the names, Voltaire, Hume, Kant, Marx and of course the name ultimately associated with the Death of God, Frederick Nietzsche. Nietzsche probably more than anyone else confronted us with godless universe and successive radical theologians have endeavoured to reconcile the proclamation of the death of God within a worldview that still finds meaning and purpose in the Christian gospel.

Let me just try to repeat this assertion. An honestly held philosophical view which claims in its rationality to dismiss the notion of an external supernatural deity nevertheless has spurred on the attempt by theists to make sense of the Jesus story and the experiences of faith to represent religion in some kind of honest rapprochement. Hence fifty years ago, Honest to God, hence religionless Christianity, hence the movement away from height to describe God to depth, to analyse experience.

In a sense God is now, for western civilisation, a God of the gaps. God is no longer in any understandable way the creator of the universe, for that we give Nobel prizes to Peter Higgs and others. God is no longer an external deity to whom we pray for help, mercy, forgiveness, succour. We have grown up in our humanity and in our human capacity to flourish and to empathise. God now for many honest seekers has more to do with a sense of transcendence and transcendence alone. Take for example Jack Spong's abandonment of traditional theism and his offering instead of a Christian gospel, emanating out of the life of Jesus. For Spong that life of Christ was a perfect expression of humanity, someone in whom the spirit of God understood as the 'ground of our being' was exemplified. In Jack's mantra we therefore as human beings are 'to live fully, love wastefully and to be all that we are intended to be.'

Now this is not very far removed from seeing religion and in particular Christian faith as a human construct embodying the highest modes of ethical behaviour. Note Holloway's Godless Morality. And of course one turns to Don Cupitt and the Sea of Faith movement. Cupitt in some ways is the answer to Nietzsche. That kingdom religion as described in the previous lecture is about solar living, about God being scattered abroad in the hearts and minds of humanity. Developing such themes and ideas, non-realists such as Freeman and Mitchell use God as a metaphor, in part for communal relationships. Non realist poets like Shirley Murray find deity in encounter:

How shall we love You

If not as human

Loving us wholly, fleshed in our frame,

Known in our hunger

Known in our meeting

Spirit to Spirit, naming our name.

Let me press the pause button for a few moments and try to recap where I have been coming from by trying to be Honest about Jesus and the church and where this is heading in regard to an honest reappraisal of God.

In Jesus all the evidence of historical examination would point to an extraordinary and exemplary life, which when one extracts it from its first century Palestinian context, still has the power to guide and inform our lives to day. Hence the church community at its best in following in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth has a blueprint for individual and communal life lived to the highest ethical ideals of love, compassion, justice and freedom.

But Jesus lived and the Church arose in a pre scientific world, in a world whose religious claims about God have gradually been challenged and in the main found wanting. Hence we arrive at a writer like Marcus Borg who as a theist attempts to persuade us to move from a dogmatic religion to a more contemporary faith built around the passions of Jesus and a theology of panentheism. Borg reasserts in a way a traditional notion of God out there and God right here. But like the philosophers and theologians of the Enlightenment onwards Borg dismisses the finger shaking, interventionist and capricious God of so much of the Judeo/Christian tradition. For Borg the heart of Christianity in many ways is just that - not a head but a heart, a sense of the sacred, nurtured through the practices of silence, meditation, labyrinth-walking, the practice of compassion. This is where I sense many are moving after the Death of God as God has been traditionally understood in so many of the world faiths.

God then becomes less of a proposition clothed about with doctrines and precepts but rather a lived experience of something deep within us. In her book 'The Case for God', as I remember, this is really the essence of Karen Armstrong's position that you have to get inside a religion and practice it in order to grasp something of the essence of 'God'. The outcome of this approach of course is a million and one initiatives such as The Charter for Compassion.

In Honest Church terms if one did have an agenda for the Church built around the kind of threads which I outlined earlier, themselves taken from an honest appraisal of the life of Jesus, those church characteristics would themselves lead to an honest reappraisal of God. Prayer and worship would have nothing to do with appeasing or supplicating an external deity but more to do with communal attention to the sacred presence, much like a Quaker gathering, Church time would also be about the affirmation of the programme, of kingdom living and kingdom working. Church rituals over rites of passage would be about plumbing the depths of human experiences of love, joy, pain, hope.

Well is that it? Is this all that there is? Just this life? Just this world? Are we on our own? Will 'God' always have to have inverted commas around the name? At the end of the day maybe we need to think of God less as a noun and more as a verb. Indeed Judaism did try to prevent making any graven image of God and Moses you remember encountered God as a verb, I am . In this way of course we locate God in our essential nature. St Paul said it first on the Areopagas in talking to the philosophers that God was the one in whom we live and move and have our being, much later did Tillich speak of God as the 'ground of being'.

Following on from this and back to an Honest church, the notion of St Paul that we are then 'the body of Christ' would mean that the God presence in the world is mediated through human action – back to those virtues , all of which see God as a verb, drawing people not to an external Being but to being godly one to another.

As this talk draws to a close I feel in many ways so inadequate in talking about God when I have on my shelves so many huge theological tomes by people such as Hans Kung, David Jenkins, and others. I feel so inadequate because we might have spent this session by listening to music, appreciating art, reading poetry or simply spending time in silence. We could have

endless conversations about spirituality. But I hope at least I have scratched a little where it 'itches'.

Above all I hope we can be honest enough in and out of our church communities to say that ultimately we do no more than to search and to make some sense for ourselves of life and all that life has thrown at each of us in our own contexts.

A few years ago, David Hope, former archbishop of York was interviewed on the television about his faith and his journey. The Archbishop, retired and presumably enjoying life beyond the demands of being an archbishop, said quite honestly that he felt he understood less and less about God the older he got. Now there is honesty.