

Easter Sunday 2008

Our understanding of what Easter means is absolutely dependent on who we think Jesus Christ is.

Was he just another religious teacher and leader?

There have been lots of those.

If this is all that Jesus is then he's in the same category as Confucius, the Buddha, and Muhammad.

These men all certainly had some worthwhile things to say.

But, if Jesus were just in the same category as them...

...then he would be of pretty limited value to us.

Anyone can teach and say things about God.

I'm doing that right now.

But just because someone does this doesn't make them worthy of worship.

I would argue that the quality of Jesus's religious teaching and leadership is greater than what any else has ever had to offer.

But if all he did was teach and lead...

...then it's pretty hard to explain why we should bother being here today.

Was Jesus primarily a social reformer and moral leader?

Again there have been lots of those.

Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. all come to mind.

All of these men changed the world for the better...

...but if all Jesus has to offer us is social change and reform than Easter still doesn't make too much sense.

People don't get together on Sunday mornings to pray to Abraham Lincoln.

Well...

...the world is a strange place so somebody, someplace might do that, but the idea hasn't really caught on.

I believe Jesus did offer a vision of moral and social change that went beyond what Lincoln, Gandhi, and Dr. King had to offer...

...which is not to downplay the significance of the lives and work of these men who were all in varying degrees inspired by Jesus himself...

...but if Jesus's mission was only to bring about moral and social change...

...then 2,000 years later the world is still a pretty messed up place...

...and it looks like his success was pretty limited.

Jesus, President Lincoln, Gandhi, and Dr. King were all killed by those who opposed their work and mission.

None of them died a natural death.

All four of these men died...

...but only three of them stayed dead.

And that's where we start to get into why Jesus is worth bothering with.

Jesus stands apart from every other religious leader and moral reformer because he alone has triumphed over death.

He alone offers us not just teaching, reform, and leadership; but a chance to share in his triumph over death.

Jesus didn't come primarily to be an inspiration, or an example, or a teacher.

He came to be a living sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus claimed again and again that he was God.

He claimed again and again that it was only through him that we could be saved.

He claimed again and again that He...

...was the only way to Heaven.

Jesus did not give us the option of viewing him as just another religious leader or social reformer.

When we look at what Jesus claimed for himself there are only three options when it comes to what we make of him.¹

He could have been insane.

He could have been an evil, egomaniacal, untrustworthy and manipulative liar.

Or he was telling the truth.

No one who was just another good person would claim what Jesus did.

He was either God, or he was a madman, or he was a deeply and profoundly evil man.

When we look at the love shown in his words and actions it's hard to believe he was that profoundly evil.

When we look at the depth of his teachings, and his ability to use argument to refute and silence those who opposed him, it doesn't seem too likely that he was insane.

¹ The following argument has been made in one form or another by a great number of defenders of Christianity. This has occurred most famously in the book "Mere Christianity" by CS Lewis. This is a tremendous book and over the years I have probably given away about ten copies of it to friends and family. I think it has been supplanted though. This has been done by a recently published book, "The Reason For God" by Timothy Keller. Keller is a Presbyterian pastor from New York City. I recommend both of these books very highly for anyone who wants to have a better understanding of who Jesus Christ is. For those who do not have much of a background in reading Christian theology texts I would suggest starting with Keller's book.

And when we look at his resurrection from the dead it's hard to find clearer evidence that he is God.

We're not here today to remember an inspirational leader...

...we're here to worship the Son of God risen from the dead.

Jesus does not stand alongside any other religious teacher or social crusader.

He stands above the Heavens and the Earth.

At his name every knee must bow.

Jesus is God, and he declared that it is only through sharing in his death and resurrection that we can have eternal life.

Jesus doesn't offer us just another set of inspirational sayings and religious wisdom.

He offers to save us from Hell through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

We celebrate Easter because Jesus can offer us something that no one else can.

This understanding of who Jesus is and what he does can seem intolerant.

That's because it is.

A good mother is intolerant of a toddler's desire to stick things into electrical sockets.

And if Jesus's claims about himself are true...

...then if we have even a drop of real love in us...

...we need to be intolerant of these spiritual lies and half truths that would keep people from the eternal life Jesus wants to give them...

...that Jesus wants to give us.

Let us bow our knees and our heads at the name of Jesus...

...knowing that it is only through his resurrection that we can be saved from condemnation and death...

...knowing that it is only through his resurrection that we can have eternal life.