

He is risen indeed!

On Easter Sunday Christians will voice this acclamation, in various forms, in churches not only in Britain, but also throughout the world. Darren Sylvester asks what does it mean, and what possible relevance can it have for people today?

The Bible tells us that a man called Jesus was born in humble circumstances in what today is the modern country of Israel; that he preached to and taught people; that he healed the sick and handicapped; and that he even brought the dead back to life. The constant theme of this message was to call people to repent (“to turn away from”) their sins and to turn back to God – the one who had created them to love, serve and obey him.

He was not just another gifted preacher with a winning personality. What set Jesus apart was that he was imbued with a Godly authority and wisdom which people recognised, especially the group of twelve men he had hand-picked to learn from him and to share in his ministry - though they also frequently misunderstood him.

A major misunderstanding was that he was God’s Messiah, the Christ, meaning ‘anointed one’ or king and would lead a rebellion against the hated Roman authorities that occupied their country. They had got it half right. Jesus was the Christ. Nevertheless, his authority and rule was of quite a different stamp. He was a king, but he was greater than any earthly power, for he had power over life and death. This was to be demonstrated when a plot against him led to his arrest, a mockery of a trial, and an execution like a common criminal by one of the cruellest means ever devised by men – crucifixion.

On the day which we now call Good Friday, he was nailed to a wooden cross and, in great agony, left to bleed and die. Moreover, that might have been the end of it. His followers certainly believed it to be so. You can read about it in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in the New Testament of the Bible. Therefore, why do Christians remember all this today? It is just like any other anniversary of the death of a much loved and admired human being whose life was cruelly snuffed out at the height of its powers? If this were the case, then Christianity would be a pointless exercise and its adherent’s foolish and deluded people, more to be pitied than admired. Indeed, this is what many non-Christians today would claim.

Christians celebrate because of what happened on that first Easter day when, on going to tend to his body, his followers found an empty tomb, and were confronted not just by an empty tomb, but by their previously dead leader, alive! Now I don’t know of any other circumstances in which a defeated, disillusioned and motley group of people, such as Jesus’ disciples were, could have been so dramatically transformed into ones joyfully able to proclaim with confidence and authority that he’d risen from the dead.

Many have tried, unconvincingly and unsuccessfully, to explain away the disciples euphoria and to discredit them, but their message spread like wildfire throughout the known world of the time and has continued to spread ever since. In addition, the message is that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, his son, God calls all men and women to repent and turn to him so that they may be forgiven of their sins and become his friends.

It means treating Jesus as Lord and Master. Christians call him by the name "Saviour", and rightly so, because he has saved them from the ultimate consequence of their sins - judgement by God. He has now made it possible for everybody to enjoy eternal life, and that life begins as soon as a person turns to Christ, and will continue with him in heaven after physical death.

Turning to Christ means looking at the world in a completely new way - Christ's way. It means renouncing the world's values and standards which are opposed to God's rule. To this extent, Christ divides. You can either accept him as a Saviour and Lord, or you can reject him: in which case you will one day have to meet him as your judge. You cannot remain neutral.

Which is it to be for you this Easter?