



### **Christianity: The Basics — Jesus**

Where should I start? My subject is Jesus, deliberately chosen as the first subject in a series about the basics of Christianity. Few things seem more basic about the Christian faith than the claim that it has something to do with Jesus. So here we are. But, even agreed that we need to start with Jesus, how do we make our start? The direction in which we set off is quite likely to determine the course that we take. There is a danger, I think, in treating Christian faith as if it were made up of a check list of beliefs, propositions to which we assent almost like ticking a box. Christian faith is not something thought, so much as something done. So we need to be careful. But we do also need to be able to talk about our faith, and organising that talk so that it is a help rather than a hindrance to others is one of the purposes of this course. How do we begin talking about Jesus? The answer, surely, is that we don't need to, because we have already begun. We hear a lot about the increasingly secular nature of our culture and society, but the fact is that Jesus continues to dominate our lives. Christianity gave us the western world in which we live. We cannot escape it. We may or may not like it, but it is there.

And there's a clue in all that, I think, to the best ways in which we might begin to think about Christian faith and our encounter with Jesus. It is something which is already in process. We start not from the beginning but from the *middle*, however little we think we know. All of us have heard the name Jesus before, all of us know something of the world which Christianity creates for us, all of us bring ideas and presuppositions about Jesus, and probably about God, to the table when we start to talk about him.



*Jesus Christ Pantocrator. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.*

Many of us will have heard or read the Bible, and in particular the gospels. Some of the stories told about Jesus—those concerning his birth, death and resurrection, for example—are some of the best known of all stories. Some of the stories told by Jesus—about the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son, for example—are almost as famous. As we come to the scriptures again and again we are bringing some of what we already know. But we are also learning how much more there is to be known, because the Jesus we find in the gospels is never a figure of sentimental wellbeing or self-justifying security. When thinking about how to start this sermon, I naturally turned to the gospel set for today, and found Jesus in Matthew's Gospel pronouncing condemnation upon the religious authorities. Thinking I was in my comfort zone—writing a sermon to introduce Jesus—I found immediately that I was very far from comfortable, and my discomfort came directly from Jesus's own words.

Starting where we are—each with our own encounter with Jesus, as a person, an idea, a story, a sacrament—does not mean staying where we are. Encountering Jesus will always knock us off our stride, undermine the sense of self and security to which we cling, challenge the expectations or predispositions which we bring to the table. But it

will do so not with theories or information or money or knowledge or possessions or any of the things that we are apt to think so very important. Encountering Jesus will knock us off our stride because it will confront us with nothing but unconditional love. The love of God, revealed and communicated in Jesus Christ, is the beginning and the end of Christianity.

This love is not something neat and tidy, to be contained or explained in a series of statements from me or the content of all our conversations. The love of God in Jesus Christ is nothing less than the meaning of life, the reason why Christianity exists in the first place, the reason why anything exists in the first place. The message of Jesus, his teaching, his actions, his miracles, his birth, life and death, everything about Jesus of Nazareth is the manifestation of God's love, the reality of that love incarnated in a human person and poured out for all of humanity by taking the weakness of our nature and transforming it with the power of divine love.

So it will never make sense to try to reduce Jesus in any way. We meet Jesus when we read the gospels, but we meet him also when we read the Old Testament prophets. We meet Jesus when we are united to him in prayer, we meet Jesus when we receive and celebrate the sacraments of his love. We meet Jesus when we know the joy of God's beauty and goodness, we meet Jesus when we are confronted by the suffering and injustice of the world. If we think we encounter Jesus in church but not outside it, it is not Jesus we are meeting, for the stranger who needs our help and the neighbour who deserves our love are much more fully the personification of Christ than any statue or stained glass window.

To encounter Jesus is to encounter what it means fully to be human, because the infinite possibilities of love—in all its strange and wonderful truth—are contained in the person we call Jesus. There is, and be, no limit to our encounter with Jesus Christ, because there is no limit to possibility where God is concerned. Our task is not to make a tremendous effort of faith, or to attempt some very remarkable achievement, our task is simply to accept that this Jesus is part of our lives, whether we know it or feel it or not. This Jesus is the reason why any of us is here, and this Jesus is the mystery and the reality of love.

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<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-jesus>



### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Do you remember the first time you heard about Jesus? What was the idea of Jesus that you first encountered like? What is it like now? What made you change your mind?
2. This sermon refers to a “difficult” text in Matthew 23. What other difficult words of Jesus can you think of in the Gospels? What should our response be to them?
3. It is so easy to create a god in our own image, to hold on to a picture of Jesus that suits us or our culture best. On one hand, theology *should* be contextual: the gospel is relevant to all times and places. On the other hand, the risk of self-serving idolatry is ever-present. How might Christians take care that our ideas about Jesus are not just convenient fictions to prop up our self-esteem or the societal status quo?