

# Meet Jesus (SERIES)

Holy Trinity Twickenham, September 2007.

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## Part 1: Jesus the Saviour (Psalm 98, Luke 19:1-10)

A church leader I know went into his local secondary school to lead an assembly about the Christmas story. After the assembly, a girl from the school came up to him because she wanted a quiet word. And what she said was interesting. She said she'd never heard the story of Jesus before. It was completely new to her. And she had a question for this church him. 'Why was it', she said, 'Why was it that Mary named her son after a swear-word?'

For this girl, growing up in England in the 21st century, all she knew about the name of Jesus is that it was a swear-word. It was news to her that Jesus was a person, never mind that he did miracles or rose from the dead or claimed to be God. She'd never come across any of that before.

In a way, we probably shouldn't be surprised about that. At least, if we look at the figures for the number of children who come to church and hear about Jesus. Back in the year 1900, 55% of all children in England went to a Sunday School. By 1970 that had fallen to 14%. And today it's down to just 4%. Now, it's true that most pupils do religious studies at school. But when it comes to hearing about the Christian faith in any depth, and when it comes to finding a personal faith, which is what people should be getting from the church, 96% of young people today have effectively dropped off the radar. Along with most adults.

So our new sermon series is all about focussing on the man at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus of Nazareth. The historical evidence that he existed is overwhelming. No serious historian would doubt that Jesus existed. The gospels are substantially eye-witness accounts of his life. But in this series, we're not focussing so much on the evidence for Jesus, as the person of Jesus. Who was he? What did he do? What sort of things did he claim about himself? Does he matter today, or is he just an interesting footnote in history?

And today we're starting by looking at the most central claim of them all about Jesus: that Jesus is a Saviour. In other words, he saves or rescues people from something. If you read the New Testament, time after time, Jesus is seen as the One who comes to save or rescue people. If you look at the historic beliefs of the church, there at the centre of all of it is one big idea: that Jesus is a Saviour. If you look at the words we sing on Sundays, they see Jesus as a Saviour.

Our reading this morning is a typical window on one of Jesus's encounters with somebody. He meets this tax collector Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus emerges a changed man. Something's happened to him. And at the end of their meeting, Jesus summarizes what's been going on. He says: 'Today, salvation has come to this house', and he then describes his own mission as coming 'to seek and to save what was lost'.

So what's that all about? Well, this language of rescue and salvation says two things, more than anything else.

1) **It says a lot about Jesus.** Jesus is more than a motivational guru. Most people these days like having quotable quotes around the place. A quote for the day on your calendar. Or motivational sayings that you have delivered to your email: Kahlil Gibran: 'The significance of man is not what he attains, but rather in what he longs to attain.' Robert Frost: 'The best way out is always through'. Confucius: 'Our greatest glory is not in never falling but in rising every time we fall'.

And everybody goes 'Hmm', and feels inspired and motivated. Lots of people today, if they see Jesus as anything, see him as a motivational guru. Somebody who comes up with little motivational sayings to inspire people to achieve better, or find moments of calm in the busyness of the day. One guru amongst many, whose words of wisdom you ponder over your elevenses.

The thing is, the language of salvation isn't the same as the language of inspiration (actually, that sounds like a quote as well!). The language of salvation is not about helping me achieve sales targets or inner peace, it's the language of a drowning man being pulled out of the river. It's the language of a girl in a burning house being rescued.

So if we're calling Jesus a Saviour, it says a lot about who we understand Jesus to be. It means we're not looking to him for good advice, we're looking to him to save us from something. It implies we can't do something for ourselves, and he's the only one who can make a difference.

2) **It says a lot about me, and the culture I'm a part of.** In other words, if Jesus is a Saviour, that means I need to be rescued from something. Something's gone wrong, in me or in the world I live in, or both. And it's interesting: what you think has gone wrong with the world says a lot about what you think needs to happen to put things right.

So if the big problem with the world is poverty, the solution has to be to do with money and justice. If the big problem with the world is ignorance, the solution has to be to do with education or enlightenment. And so on.

And one of the most interesting things about the Christian faith is its understanding of what's gone wrong with the world. Now, if you want to do a bit more reading about this, I wrote a book on it. It's on our new bookstall. And it's called 'What's Wrong'. But in a nutshell, the Christian diagnosis of what's wrong is this.

Broken and damaged relationships. Another word for it is alienation. Broken relationships between me and God. Broken relationships between me and other people. Broken relationships between me and the world I live in. And even broken relationships within myself (things like: I know what I ought to do, but I don't always do it). I'm alienated from myself in different ways.

And when we say Jesus is the Saviour, we're saying that in some extraordinary way he's the answer to these different sorts of brokenness. He's the one who can repair the damage in a way I never can, in a way that humanity never can, under its own steam. Now, we don't have time today to explore how he does that. But here's a clue: it's got a lot to do with his death on the cross and his rising again.

But the important message this morning is this. When we say Jesus is a Saviour, what we're actually doing is expressing a whole world-view. In other words, a whole understanding of what's gone wrong with our world, and what's been done to put it right. And right at the centre of all this stands the compelling, extraordinary figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

As that young girl discovered, Jesus is more than a swear-word. Much, much more. And the challenge for all of us this morning is this. How can I get to know this Jesus better, in the weeks to come? And how can my ideas about Jesus as Saviour become deeper and more personal experience of Jesus?

## Part 2: Jesus the Healer (Psalm 30, Luke 8:40-56)

Some of you may have heard me talk about a conference for church leaders I went to up in Harrogate recently. One of the speakers was talking about praying for people to be healed of illnesses. And his message was this. Maybe the reason we don't see many physical healings taking place is because we don't expect them, and we don't ask God for them. And maybe if we did expect them and ask God for them, we'd see more of them.

And after his talk, he got us to pray with the people around us for the healing of various ailments. And a woman sitting just in front of me was instantly healed of almost total deafness that she'd had for over 30 years. I talked to her about it afterwards, and she was in no doubt that she'd just experienced something quite extraordinary in answer to prayer.

But at the same time, other people were prayed for and weren't healed. So that raises all sorts of questions. Should we pray for people to be healed, here in church? And should we expect to see people healed? Has something gone wrong if they're not healed?

We've reached Part 2 of our new sermon series on Jesus. And this week we're looking at Jesus the Healer. And one thing's for sure: if you read the accounts of Jesus's life, you'll see the thing he seems to spend more time on than anything else is healing people. Incidentally, I love the moment in our gospel reading today when Jesus goes to the home of Jairus, and everybody's in mourning. What pastorally sensitive words does Jesus say to the grieving family? 'Stop wailing!'

Anyway, what we're looking at today is why Jesus focussed so much on healing, and we'll be asking if we should expect healings today. And by the way, I don't buy into the whole idea that did the rounds in the 1960s that Jesus didn't really heal people, that the stories were added later, to make him sound more special or more godlike.

Historically, that doesn't work. The very reason Jesus was such a dramatic and controversial figure is that he did extraordinary things, and made extraordinary claims. Within a few generations, belief in Jesus as a miracle worker and Jesus as God became the main faith across the whole Roman Empire. The reason you get big ripples in a pool is because a big rock's been thrown in. And Jesus was clearly a big rock.

The Roman and Jewish authorities were out to discredit Jesus. Thousands of people had met with Jesus, and if they all knew Jesus wasn't doing extraordinary things, they'd have said so. Historically, the best explanation for people's reactions to Jesus is that he really was healing people and apparently bringing some people back from the dead.

So what do these healings of Jesus tell us? Well, just a few thoughts:

- 1) **God wants to see healing and wholeness.** Back in the Old Testament, an important word is 'shalom'. It means 'peace', but it's more than that. It means health, good relationships, contentment, justice. It's about healing and wholeness for people and the creation. So time after time in the OT you see God bringing healing to broken people and a broken world. In the Psalm we read earlier, the writer thanks God for bringing him healing.

So when Jesus comes healing people, he's saying: 'Yes, that's who God is. He wants to bring hope and healing to people's bodies, and to their minds.' In Jesus's healings we see him acting as God, to bring healing to God's world.

- 2) **Healing is a Kingdom thing.** The main theme of Jesus's teaching is the Kingdom of God. Which is not a geographical area like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And it doesn't mean life after death. It means the kingship or rule of God in people's lives, on earth, here and now.

When people have faith in Jesus, he talks about them entering the Kingdom of God. The idea is that you're now under the rule of a new King, and you can experience the power and privileges of that Kingdom for yourself. And it's clear that for Jesus, one of the privileges of living under the Kingship of God is that we can experience healing.

So Jesus's healings are about the power of God's Kingdom breaking into our world. And in the gospels we see people's reactions to this happening. They're filled with wonder and amazement. And I was too, up in Harrogate, when that woman was healed so dramatically. It was a reminder to me of the power of God. It was a moment where I moved from talking about God to experiencing the power of God. It was what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, breaking into our everyday lives.

- 3) **We mustn't split 'supernatural' healing from medical healing.** Some people talk about 'supernatural' or 'miraculous' healing, which is what God does; and medical healing, which is what doctors do. And I've even heard some Christians ask if going to see a doctor doesn't show a lack of faith.

Now, that sounds terribly spiritual, but it's wrong. In the Bible, God's very 'hands on' in the world. He cares about the tiniest details of life, like numbers of sparrows and the hairs on our head. He even enters his creation to be a part of it. So words like 'natural' and 'supernatural' don't help us when we're thinking about healing. It would be better to put it this way: all healing comes from God, and all healing is 'natural' because it happens within nature. Sometimes it's the God-given skills of doctors that bring healing. But sometimes we should expect God, within nature, to bring spontaneous or gradual healing without the help of doctors. We need to be open to that possibility.

- 4) **Sometimes, physical healing is not what we need most.** When I was a journalist, I interviewed a Christian leader from Sri Lanka. I asked him what he felt we could learn from the church in Sri Lanka. And he said this: 'the value of suffering'. What he was saying is that there are some things we can only learn through hardship and pain.

CS Lewis called pain 'God's megaphone'. Of course, we normally see suffering as a curse. And I certainly don't think we should be masochists, who go looking for pain. But I'm convinced that some of us only learn hard lessons if we go through hardship. Suffering can be an alarm clock that wakes us up and brings us to our senses, and puts things back in a right perspective.

- 5) **One of the jobs of the church is to pray for healing.** The clearest instruction to pray for healing is in the letter of James, near the end of the Bible. James says that a normal way to deal with sickness is to take it to people in your church, and get them to pray for you. There's no suggestion that this is only for the early church. It's something we should still be doing now, here in church, and outside church as well.

And that's why we have two people who're over in the side chapel after every service at 10.30. They're there to pray with you. And that can include prayers for healing: healing of relationships, healing of memories or emotions, healing of issues to do with our mind like depression, and healing in our bodies too.

Sometimes I might pray for healing and God's answer might be 'No'. Sometimes it might be 'Wait'. Sometimes there are things I can only learn by going through times of struggle and hardship. God alone has the bigger picture that I can't see. But sometimes, the answer will be 'Yes'. And God will bring healing to our minds and bodies. And when that happens, we're experiencing the power of the Kingdom of God that Jesus talked about, breaking into our world.

I sometimes think about the state of the church in this country. And I think: 'So many words, so little power.' I mean, so little experience of the power of God to change people's lives. And maybe that speaker up in Harrogate put his finger on the reason why. It's not that God has retired from the healing business. It's that we don't expect it, so we don't ask for it.

### **Part 3: Jesus the Friend (Ecclesiastes 4:7-12, John 11:1-44)**

I don't know how much you keep up with popular culture, and what's on Television and in the media. If you do, and particularly if you have children (or grandchildren), you're probably aware that our culture is fascinated by 'super heroes' of one kind or another. It's been true in my family too. In our dressing-up box at home, over the years, there have been Batman suits, Superman costumes, Spiderman outfits and many more. The current superhero in our house is undoubtedly Dr. Who. You may have seen some of the recent series on Saturday evenings. It became compulsive viewing in our house – myself included! I had a look at the official website, and it starts, 'Dr Who is not a name, but a question to which we're still learning the answer...'

Well in our sermons this month we're asking a similar question. 'Who exactly is Jesus', the person at the very centre of the Christian faith. Is he, in a sense, some kind of superhero? - someone with extraordinary powers and abilities, who is not bound by the normal constraints of being human? – someone completely different from us even though he might appear rather similar? Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for us today? That's the question we're considering this morning.

If you've been at Holy Trinity over the past couple of weeks you might be coming to the conclusion that he is some kind of being from another world. We looked first at 'Jesus the Saviour'; Jesus who through his death and resurrection rescues the whole world from sin and death, and brings us into a new relationship with God himself. Last week we considered Jesus as a healer, and saw how he even had the power to raise someone from the dead. It was the conclusion of the early church that this man really was the Son of God. In the gospels, when Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, Peter says, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt 16:16). And Jesus accepts this description of who himself.

But it has always been the faith of the church that Jesus was also fully human. As you read the gospels you begin to build up a picture of a very real human being. You find him sitting by a well, tired after a long journey tramping through the Judean countryside. He gets angry with people who had turned the temple into a market place. He has compassion for people who are ill or blind or poor or hungry. At times he feels the need to withdraw from the crowds, and spend time alone in prayer. He receives the love and devotion of a woman who chooses to anoint his feet with perfume. We find him drawing together a group of people who will work with him, and learn from him, rather than just going it alone. And he doesn't just have disciples, he also has close friends who he entrusts himself to. He's tempted to abuse the extraordinary power that he has, but doesn't do so. He weeps over Jerusalem and all the bloodshed that has gone on there. And at his crucifixion he feels rejected and forsaken by God. These are all very human reactions and emotions. This is where the idea of Jesus as simply some kind of super hero, detached from the realities of human life begins to break down.

So I thought it might be helpful this morning to focus in on one 'snapshot' in the life of Jesus. And perhaps we can ask that question, 'who is this man'? The snapshot came in our gospel reading today, and is an account of Jesus with his close friends, Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Now Mary, Martha and Lazarus were brother and sisters, and lived in a village called Bethany, a few miles from Jerusalem. Jesus seems to have visited them on a number of occasions, and he was obviously very close to them. Mary and Martha describe their brother as 'the one Jesus loved' (John 11:3), and Jesus refers to Lazarus very specifically as his friend (11:11).

As the story starts to unfold we find that Lazarus has become sick; and so his sisters send for Jesus. They would have known about Jesus' healing ministry, which Mike was talking about last week, and maybe even the fact that he had raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. But by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus had died. Mary takes him to the tomb where her brother was laid, and Jesus weeps. It's the shortest verse in the whole Bible: John 11:35 'Jesus wept'. He's also described as being 'deeply troubled' or 'disturbed' (v33). It's clear that he was genuinely distressed by the loss of a friend, and moved by the grief of those around him. It's a very human picture.

Jesus' friendship with Mary and Martha is interesting too. Mary is described in this passage as 'the same (Mary) who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair' (John 11:2). She was the same Mary who on another occasion had 'sat at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching' (Luke 10:39). You may remember that incident. Jesus was passing through Bethany with his disciples, and Martha invites him into her home. While she's doing all the practical work in the house, Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to everything he had to say. And Martha gets annoyed with her.

So often we think that story is a challenge to us to spend more time in prayer and worship, rather than always being distracted by the busyness of life. But it's much more than that. What Martha was annoyed about is the fact that Mary had broken the social norms of their time. Jewish houses in those days were divided into male 'space' and female 'space', and male and female roles were strictly defined. Mary had crossed this boundary, and was sitting listening to Jesus' teaching. This was another thing that women weren't supposed to do. Rabbis were male, and they only had male disciples; yet Jesus affirms Mary's right to be his disciple. It must have been quite a radical friendship.

Jesus' reaction to Martha is significant too. He's quite frustrated and upset by her – something that you rarely see of him in the gospels. And maybe that's because she has chosen to go along with the cultural stereotype of who women were, and what they did. She'd missed the opportunity that he was offering her to live a radically different life, and you sense that he is disappointed with her. Real friendship seeks the best for the person, and Martha had missed the point.

So Jesus' friendships with Lazarus, Mary and Martha are significant. They give us an insight into the very human nature of Jesus, and yet the very extraordinary person he was too. So yes, in a sense he is the superhero, He is the Son of God; but he is also human like us. And that very humanness of Jesus is something that has been of central importance to Christians throughout the centuries. If Jesus is indeed God's Son, then he, more than anyone else, shows us what God is really like. He demonstrates the very nature of God himself. And what we find in Jesus is God identifying with us; God stepping down to experience what it is to be human, with all its joys and sorrows. He is therefore able to rejoice with us when things are going well, and to weep with us in suffering and loss. God chooses to be with us, not set apart from us.

Yet so often our society's perception of God, and maybe our understanding of him too, is of someone 'out there' who is critical of us, and in some way 'against' us. Some of you may know that I'm training for ordained ministry in the church at the moment. And as part of that training I recently spent a couple of months at West Middlesex hospital, working with the chaplaincy team there. It was a great privilege to observe their work. But one of the things that I found quite disturbing during that time was people's perceptions of God, particularly when they were going through difficult times. So often I heard the words, 'I don't know what I've done to deserve this'; or 'I don't understand why God is doing this to me'. There was a sense of God as someone 'out there', punishing us for things we may have done but don't necessarily even know about. I found that disturbing because it is so far from the picture of God that we find in the life of Jesus.

So what does that mean for us today? What difference will it make to us now? Well it may be that we need to take time to read the gospels for ourselves; to take time to look at the life of Jesus, and see what picture of God we find there. But there's more to it than that too. Christians throughout the centuries have not only looked to Jesus as the image of God; they have also understood him as the risen Lord who is alive and with us now. He's not just a dead hero, but someone with whom we can have a living relationship. And maybe the challenge for us today is to pray that we will each know that living relationship in a very real way.

The first hymn we sang this morning sums it up very well:

*What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!  
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

#### Part 4: The teaching of Jesus (Matthew 5:1-12)

Last week a Sudanese couple arrived in Twickenham. They were refugees from Dafur. They arrived around 8 in the evening, at Twickenham station, to make their way to a hostel on the other side of the A 316. But as they reached the roundabout on the 316, some youths mugged them. They took their money and left the man with a gash in his forehead.

Fortunately, a bishop was on his way to a meeting in a local church. He was driving along the 316 and he saw the couple, clearly in big trouble. But it was already gone 8. And he was late for his meeting. So he drove on.

The next person who noticed the Sudanese couple was a charity worker who lived near the station. She'd been at the office for 12 hours and was looking forward to getting home and collapsing in front of the TV. She saw the couple in the distance but realised if she got involved, she'd be there half the night, talking to the police, taking them to the hospital and so on. And she didn't have the energy. So she pretended she hadn't noticed.

The next person who saw the couple was a man who was active in racist politics. He believed that Britain should only be for whites, and people of other colours should be repatriated. In the past, he'd had criminal convictions for incitement to racial hatred. In the end, even his wife left him because she couldn't stand his racist views.

But when he saw the Sudanese couple, him covered in blood and her crying, he felt sorry for them. He got out his mobile phone and called an ambulance. And he waited with them till the ambulance and police arrived. Now, which of these three people - the bishop, the charity worker, or the racist - was the real neighbour to that couple?

At some point while I was telling the story, I suspect a penny dropped. 'That's not a true story about something that happened last week. That's a fictional story with a moral!' And by the end, you probably figured out that it was a story of Jesus, The Good Samaritan. I just updated the characters and the setting.

We've spent a few weeks looking at who Jesus really was. Today we're looking at the teaching of Jesus. And I just want to underline two things from the story:

1) **Jesus was a brilliant storyteller.** Jesus's normal way of teaching people was to tell stories. Stories with recognizable people and places, everyday situations. And then he'd leave people to draw their own conclusions.

I've just finished reading the biography of Chairman Mao. Apparently, some of the Maoists' political speeches went on for up to 10 hours. But Jesus didn't bore people with long lectures about philosophy or even about religion. He told powerful stories, that lasted less than a minute, but were like a time-bomb for the people who heard them. They'd go away and mull them over, and then there'd be an explosion in their mind when they realised what the stories were saying. We call the stories 'parables'.

2) **Jesus turns conventional wisdom upside down.** The whole point of the story of the Good Samaritan is that it reverses normal expectations. Today we think of Samaritans as caring people who help people. But in Jesus's day a Samaritan was literally a person from Samaria, and they were seen as very dodgy people. People you didn't mix with. So in Jesus's story, the priests and good people pass by, while it's the dodgy Samaritan who helps the man who was mugged. That's why in my version, it's the bishop and the charity worker who pass by, and it's the racist who helps them.

Jesus reverses normal expectations, and he makes some profound points. Like: it's not your job or status that matters: it's how you actually treat people in your daily life. Like: how would you and I react if we were in the same situation?

And the same thing happens in our Gospel reading. It's a passage we call the 'Beatitudes', which really just means 'happy' or 'blessed'. Because Jesus is talking about what sort of people are happy and blessed in this life. But what he says goes against conventional wisdom.

In a world where people chase money, Jesus says: Happy are people who recognise their own poverty. In a world obsessed with sex, Jesus says: Happy are people who keep their hearts pure. In a world that values comfort, Jesus says: Happy are people who stand up for what's right and end up being persecuted (he'd have a lot to say about what's happening in Burma right now). It's a whole new way of defining 'happy'.

Jesus wasn't a teacher of 'niceness' or middle-class values. He's more disturbing and challenging than that. Jesus was a storyteller, whose stories invite us to step inside a different vision of reality. A different set of priorities. A different vision of what life's all about.

And when we baptise children, we do it with the hope that as they grow, they'll follow the vision set out by Jesus and not the shallow fads and fashions of their day. And we pray for their parents and godparents, that that will be true of them as well.

The challenge to all of us is whether we'll take the time to read those stories, to allow them to shape who we are, and how we see the world.