

## Reflection for Sunday 6 June

What do most people really think about Jesus? The truth seems to be that when most of us bother to think about the question, we're stumped. Not many people believe he is God, not too many believe he rose from the dead, but not many either (well, not more than about a quarter of the population) think that he was just a fictional creation. Most people think of him as a good man, a spiritual leader or a prophet. What most people tacitly agree is that not thinking about him much, it's possible to put his strange teachings out of our minds along with the even stranger claims made about him by those who wrote the story of his life.

Another way of coping with this very odd story is to make fun of it. Monty Python did the job rather well. So does the comedian Henning Wehn, who loves to suggest false facts about Jesus every time he appears on the panel show, 'The Unbelievable Truth.' He claimed, for example, that Jesus invented shoes.

I'm not inclined to be too hard on Wehn. His wry, dry humour is sometimes spot on, as in this singularly wonderful comment from 2013: *'They might call the Bible the Good Book, but nobody would ever call it the Well-Written Book. Dozens of writers writing in all different languages and no competent editing – it's the literary equivalent of Alan Pardew's Newcastle.'* Just so - if Toon fans can remember so far back.

In a way, if people are making fun of us, they're doing a valuable job in ensuring that we aren't ignored entirely. But, and this is a very hefty 'but', if we read the Gospels and are prepared to take the Jesus story seriously, we're faced with some stark and difficult choices, which is possibly another reason why many more people, don't bother to engage with the story at all.

It begins right at the start of Jesus's public ministry. He certainly draws the crowds, but those who know him best, his family and friends, together with the religious authorities who think they ought to know what he's about, are united in alarm.

To his family, he's an embarrassment. They think a screw has come loose. He's making a very big fool of himself and they must stop him before he goes too far. He may be special, every family member is special after all, but this is something madly different.

The scribes who've come from the big city to see what all the fuss is about think he's mad too. He's doing some alarmingly amazing things, but they are so sure that these are so far at odds with their understanding of the Jewish law, that they can only imagine he's bad, for to be mad, often meant, so they thought, being possessed by a demon.

Jesus points out, not so gently, that their logic isn't terribly convincing, because someone possessed by demons is unlikely to go round casting out other demons. They aren't impressed. It's much easier to demonise him and get him out from under their skin.

Real encounters with Jesus, so it seems, have always presented us with some stark choices. It's much easier to find a comfortable way of keeping him at arm's length.

Jesus has other ideas, and in our passage today makes some hefty claims about the vital business of standing up for goodness and truth against lies and falsehood, and then even calls into question the real significance of family relationship that almost all of us hold so dear. Jesus can be a deeply uncomfortable presence if we give him half the chance.

Please don't worry too much that you'll be sent to damnation for having the odd bad thought or for expressing an honest doubt about God's existence. We'd all be damned if that was so. No, Jesus, is far more concerned that no-one can or should be allowed to get away with deliberately and consistently trying to peddle falsehood and by subverting good with evil.

This is, in short, what it means for us to deliberately turn our backs on all that God stands for. And we could say, I suppose, that the consequences are those that we bring upon ourselves, and aren't the action of a jealous, peeved deity. Truth and goodness matter.

Jesus's words about families cut, if anything, closer to the bone. Jewish society, Jesus's own society, valued the family enormously, as did Jesus himself as is quite clear from other passages in the Gospels, but if our families only serve to deflect us or isolate away from the truth and goodness that is God, then something is seriously amiss. This is Jesus's stark message.

Sometimes, I think, we use the term 'church family' far too glibly, without thinking through what it might mean. It can just be an easy shorthand for 'those of us who get together to sing a few hymns once a week.' Jesus challenges us to really take to heart the commitment to truth, healing, forgiveness and goodness that is at the heart of the Gospel and do our utmost to live it out. It follows that if the church isn't the place where that is experienced in real, warm and utterly obvious ways, then our family talk is well wide of the mark.

Of course, there's no better place to begin to live out those essential qualities in the challenging messiness of the ordinary families we find ourselves in, alongside people we may love deeply, but who may confuse and frustrate us from time to time too.

Just remember in all this, that Jesus comes to help us make our lives better, more fun and more fulfilling. Jesus comes to help us see one another as we really are – without embarrassed displacements, misgivings or the need to feel we have to control one another in line with how we see things. This Gospel may be deeply challenging but, at its very heart it's about liberty.