

What is this Christianity, anyway?

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[0 : 00] I'm going to take a little while to address this question, what is Christianity anyway?

What is all this about Christianity? And I came across this quote from Lee Mack, a comedian, on Desert Island Discs, which is actually October 2013, where, do you know Desert Island Discs? You're allowed to choose a book to take with you. You already have the Bible and Shakespeare. And he said, oh, I'm glad you get the Bible, because I would read the Bible. I think it's quite odd that people like myself in their 40s are quite happy to dismiss the Bible, but I've never read it. I always think that if an alien came down and you were the only person they met and they said, what's life about? What's earth about? Tell us everything. And you said, well, there is a book here that purports to tell you everything.

Some people believe it to be true. Other people do not believe it to be true. Wow, what's it like? And you go, I don't know. I've never read it. That would be an odd thing, wouldn't it? So at the very least, read it.

[1 : 12] Well, that's good advice from a comedian, isn't it? A lot of people dismiss Christianity because they have no idea what it is. They haven't read the Bible. So I thought we would have a little quick look at what is Christianity anyway, just for a few minutes this morning.

So where would we get an answer to this question from? Some people have an answer from school lessons and that's about as much as they know about Christianity.

Christianity. I have to say that if you were taught Christianity in school, you were probably taught by somebody who wasn't very enthusiastic about it, probably. And what you have got in your head is probably quite misleading.

We know quite well, I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying this, the school teacher at Downs Junior School who used to teach the kids there about Christianity, he taught my daughter.

And he taught them that every church has an altar. And I think he got that bit wrong. Anyway, there we go. You could look on Wikipedia.

[2 : 21] I wouldn't trust Wikipedia for everything. The TV, the Vicar of Dibley is ages old, isn't it? There was a TV series about a lady vicar.

Don't get your information from there. The best place to go is to the primary source, to Jesus. And we have Jesus' words and we can look at them and see what he said.

And the words that I'd like us to think about is just this couple of sentences which were read to us. I'm just going to open my Bible so that I have got them in front of me.

Where Jesus said this, it isn't the only thing he said, but he did say, Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. That's what he said. So that's what I'd like us to think about. So don't just, you know, let's be thoughtful about this.

[3 : 26] When did Jesus say these words? Well, the answer is he said it at what we would call the Last Supper. I didn't try to draw the Last Supper. Other people have done a better job than me of drawing the Last Supper.

But it is a particular point in history. It was just before he was arrested, just before he was sentenced to death, and just before he was executed by the Roman method of crucifixion, which is nailing somebody on a cross until they bleed to death and dehydrate to death.

So very disgraceful and humiliating and painful and appalling death. And Jesus had this in mind at this supper.

He'd actually said to his disciples, I am going away. He was telling them that he was going to be betrayed. He'd said, as Rachel read to us, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times.

So Jesus knew that he was going to die. And the cross on which he died, the sacrificial cross on which he paid the price for human sin, that's looming over this conversation.

[4 : 37] So it has a specific historical context. And you might be thinking, well, I don't even believe that Jesus actually said this. Did Jesus actually say it?

Let's ponder that for a moment. Or is it just a nice fairy story? Is that what Christianity is? It's just a nice fairy story. Which is really saying, does the writer of this ancient document lie like Donald Trump does?

That's really what it's saying, isn't it? He's written all this down and it's just a barefaced lie. Well, there are things to be said in disagreement with that idea that it's a lie.

Is it a nice fairy story? Actually, it's not nice. It's not a nice story. It's about an appalling death.

Christianity is not just comforting and convenient.

Christianity is a faith which very consciously takes people to martyrdom. If you're a Christian, you're a Christian in good times and bad times.

[5 : 51] You're a Christian in friendly circumstances and unfriendly circumstances. And most of the Christians, most many of the Christians in the first generation would have literally faced death for their faith in Jesus Christ.

So to say it's a nice fairy story is really a bit of a caricature. Well, historicity is the word which means is it historically true and accurate?

When you're looking into history, you look for how close are the documents to the original thing that they're talking about? Do we have more than one thing attesting this or are we just going on one lone individual?

Things like that. That's the scientific way to do historicity. Of course, the Bible comes out really very, very strongly on this. Very strongly on this. Because we've got four separate accounts of Jesus, the four Gospels.

They're independent documents. They have differences and people notice the differences. But the fact that you've got four of them is a very strong argument for historicity.

[7 : 03] And the timing of them goes very close back to the original dates. So we happily accept the historicity of many things where we have only one manuscript and it's hundreds and hundreds of years away from the original date.

Now, the Bible is strong on historicity. And then you think of the character of the writer. Now, I don't know what your view is of Donald Trump. I don't have a very high view of Donald Trump.

And I think many people this side of the Atlantic wouldn't have a very high view of him. In terms of his morality, in terms of the way he deals with facts and truth.

And I would venture to say that if you were to put John into the same category, you would be making a huge, huge mistake. Because John is a very honest writer.

He tells us about the faults of the people of whom he's writing about. He claims to have a very high moral standard. Because he's the one who talks about walking in light.

[8 : 14] He takes that stand all the way through. And he very specifically says, on a number of occasions, what I'm telling you is true.

What I'm telling you I saw. What I'm telling you I heard. What I'm telling you I was there. So if we're going to say, oh it's just a fairy story.

I don't think we're dealing with this historical source honestly. I think it's us who's twisting it to suit us.

Rather than the other way around. And then there's the argument that C.S. Lewis made in one of his books. It might have been Mere Christianity. Which is a very fine book to read defending Christianity.

And he says, okay, let's suppose it's made up. Just think of the quality of the person who must have made it up.

[9 : 19] Because the Jesus that the New Testament speaks about is such a real character. He's such a unique individual. The things that he says, I don't think anybody could make up.

Unless it came from him himself. I don't think anybody could dream it up. So for these reasons I just quickly say. I think we should take that Jesus did say this.

I think we've got very good reasons to believe that we have words from the Master himself. So let's look at what these words say. Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me. So what sort of saying is this? Should we take it as being a timeless truth that applies to everybody?

Like, I don't know, never say never. Or what goes around comes around. Or too many cooks spoil the broth. Something like that. Is it a timeless truth of that nature?

[10:30] Or is it something deliberately obscure? Because some of the things that Jesus says are difficult to get our heads around. Certainly the disciples found them difficult to get their heads around. It's deliberately obscure.

So I think Zen Buddhism, I'm happy to be corrected if I'm wrong, invites you to think of the sound of one hand clapping. The sound of one hand clapping.

I think that's just meant to make you go around in circles. Is Jesus just making you go around in circles?

I think what is actually is more like a farewell speech at a leaving event. But that's what it is. It's a farewell speech. Jesus has got his friends, his disciples around him.

And he's telling them, I'm going. And here are some things I want you to understand for the future. And I think on an occasion like that, what one is being is very serious.

[11:36] As Jesus is saying, I won't have many opportunities to tell you things like this. So really do take me seriously. It's loving because Jesus is concerned for these people.

He says, doesn't he, don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. And it's very responsible. He's saying, I feel responsible for you. I want to tell you something that will really help you.

I think that's the way we should take these words. So let's see what he says. I think there's a very positive statement about Jesus himself.

Because three times he refers to himself. I am the way. And I am the truth. And I am the life.

Although it doesn't say I am three times. It means I am three times, doesn't it? So here is somebody, I think fairly quietly, but seriously and caringly and truthfully saying about himself, I am these things.

[12:50] So let's notice, he's not saying a truth about ethics. He's not saying the thing I want to leave you with is, guys, always put your best foot forward or something like that.

It is not a thou shalt. It's not, this is what you've got to do, guys. What it is, is this is who I am. That's what he's leaving them with in this sentence.

It's not even a philosophy. It's about Jesus himself. So that's something to take on board. What's Christianity about? When Jesus says this in this sentence, he says it's about him.

It's about Jesus himself. And to do that, it seems to me, is either extremely arrogant or a divine claim.

The person who says three times, I am the way, the truth, the life, is either arrogant.

[14:02] I suppose he could be mad. Jesus doesn't give the impression of being either of those two things. And if it's not those two things, it's a claim to the sort of thing that only God can say.

A very positive statement about Jesus. It's a very negative statement, a very exclusive statement about everything else.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. No one comes to the Father except through me.

And that's an extremely negative statement, isn't it? No one comes to the Father any other way except through me.

And one of the breathtaking things is the way that Jesus seems to say this. Without any sense of sort of nervousness, am I allowed to say this?

[15:10] Or any sense that it's out of place. He just says it. He says loads of things like this. Just says them. And here he's saying Christianity is an exclusive religion in this sense.

It's open to all. All. It's open to all. But it's not on the same level as all. Jesus isn't saying, you know, you need to choose between, you know, this religion's got that going for it.

This religion's got that going for it. That religion's got that going for it. I've got my religion. He doesn't say that. He says no one comes to the Father except through me.

He claims simple, total, spiritual uniqueness. It's a total claim, isn't it?

There is no other way. So are there many roads to God? Well, Jesus says no.

[16:17] And he says, there's only me. I don't know whether you've read the Narnia books. I love the Narnia books myself. There's one bit where the children arrive in some sort of in-between world.

They get very thirsty. And there's a stream they can drink from. But the stream is guarded by a lion. And they're afraid of going near the lion. And the lion says, you must come near to me.

Otherwise, you can't drink. And they say, but surely there's water somewhere else. And the lion says, there's no other water. He just says it.

And they know it's true. And Jesus says, there's no other way. He doesn't have to labor the point or shout about it. He just says it's true. So let's look at these claims that he makes.

Number one, I am the way. I am the way. I am the way. Now, way implies some sort of travel, doesn't it?

[17 : 22] I am the way. I am the route. I am the pathway. It implies that life has a destination.

There's somewhere that you can reach. It implies that life has a goal. There's a way to get to the place that you need to get to. Or if you like it, if you think of it as a quest, a quest for the inner meaning, the truth, there is that center.

And there's a way to get to it. You know, like Raiders of the Lost Ark. What's his name? Indiana Jones.

Yeah. Indiana Jones is trying to find his way to the treasure. And Jesus says, I am the way. There is a route.

There is somewhere worth getting to. And although there are many useful things in this life, there are many things that you say, this is the way.

[18 : 29] But Jesus says, it's not any of those. It's not yoga. It's not, you know, the way he's being fit. No, it's not the way he's earning a lot of money. He's having a nice family. Or sex.

Or science. That's the way. Jesus says, no, whatever those other things are, I am the way. Jesus himself claims that he is the way.

Let's look at the second claim. He says, I am the truth. I am the truth. And there's an implication to this.

The implication is that life has a meaning. And there is such a thing as truth. And there is, if you like, a truth behind everything. Because Jesus isn't just saying a trivial description.

He's not just saying, oh, I am the truth that, you know, the tallest tower in the world is this. Or I am the truth that, in England, people drive on the left. And other places, people drive on the right.

[19 : 27] I mean, those things are true, but Jesus isn't meaning a whole set of little true facts. He's saying the truth. The deep truth. The truth behind this reality.

I am that, is what Jesus is saying. And he's saying that there is a truth behind this universe. Who is a God who totally shows himself in Jesus.

Is there a truth behind the universe? Well, the scientists, well, scientists who reduce things just to science would say, oh, well, it's just facts and measurements and stars and all of that stuff.

But Jesus says, yeah, those are all those things. But underneath that is a deeper truth. The deep truth behind the universe is not $E = MC^2$.

The deep truth behind the universe is the Father who made everything. And Jesus says, I am that. The truth comes from me.

[20 : 36] And all other revelations pale into insignificance compared with seeing Jesus.

I am the truth. Claim number three. I am the life. I am the life. You could even omit the the to get the flavor.

I am life. I am life. He's not talking about lifestyle. I'm trying to think of some examples of this.

I'm sure there's some songs which say, oh, for the life of a jolly sailor or something like that. Or, oh, for the life of the gypsy or something like that. He's not talking about lifestyle. You know, my life in gardening or my life in interior design or something like that.

He's not talking about a lifestyle. He's saying, I am life itself. I am the source of life. The heart from which all life streams is found in me.

[21 : 45] You're not just talking about biology, biological life. Although that would be wonder enough. Because if you've ever had a dead tomato plant, you can't put life back into it, can you?

Have you ever tried putting life back into a dead tomato plant? Often I've wished. If only I could. But we can't even do the biological part of it. But Jesus says, I am the source of life in its deepest meaning.

And it's interesting to notice that just a sentence or two ago, Jesus had talked about his death. And there's an implication here from Jesus.

It certainly assumes his divinity. That as the father has life in himself, so he has given the son to have life in himself. Jesus is the fountain of life.

That's his divinity. But it also assumes his resurrection. That Jesus is going to be grasped by death. But death won't be able to hold him.

[22 : 47] And he'll burst free from death. Into life. Into eternal life. Into newness of life. And Jesus says, I'm the source of this. I am life in its freshest, fullest way.

So there are the three claims. And I would submit this morning that that gives us a picture of what Christianity is really about.

It's not about altars. It's not about seasons of the year. It's not about architecture. It's about Jesus. The Jesus who said, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And no one comes to the father except through me. And how are we to respond to these claims? Well, if, and they are claims, because Jesus doesn't just leave us where we are.

As soon as we begin to get a sense of who Jesus is, I'm interested that Nick said that was one of the first things that he heard when he came along to church. As soon as we get a sense of who Jesus is, we get a sense of the fact that his very existence makes claims on us.

[23 : 53] He intrudes into people's lives. And if Jesus has not intruded into your life, then you haven't actually met him yet.

He intrudes. He says, this is what I want. This is what I demand. This is who me being what I am demands of you. He says, I'm the way.

But it seems to me that the response to somebody who says, I am the way, is to follow that way. And to walk Jesus, if I can put it that way.

That's what Nick has started. And the way to be with a Jesus who says, I am the way, is to follow that way.

And to walk Jesus every step of life to the end. And he says, I'm the truth. And the way to respond to a Jesus who says, I'm the truth, is to believe him.

[24 : 53] And that his truth overrules all other claims of reality. Or his light tells us the way to see everything. And I think you said something to that effect in your testimony.

I can't remember what you said. Did you say something about seeing things in a different way? Something like that. Something like that.

Yeah. Thank you very much. The way, the truth, and the life. Jesus says, I am the life.

And I know that Christians talk about the act of becoming a Christian is to say, we give our life to Jesus. Which is true. But when Jesus says, I am the life, what's actually more important is that he gives his life to us.

Isn't it? That's the issue. Does he give his life to us? That's the point. Lord, you are the way, the truth, and the life.

[25 : 56] Show me how to walk your way. Show me how to believe your truth. And will you give your life to me? I've finished.

Those are the points. That's the text. But I think to do that justice, we all need to think very, very carefully.

And let's take a moment to do that. I'll leave the text there. We'll just think about that for a moment, and then we'll close by singing. Let's be quiet for a minute.

Let's be quiet for a minute.