

What is a Christian? A disciple of Jesus

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[0:00] Look together at the question, what is a Christian? And for those of you who are visitors, let me say that this is a series of questions that we've been asking and looking at. And I'm going to ask this question again. Let's ask God's help as we come to hear.

Lord in heaven, thank you for what we have witnessed and heard today in the lives of Matt and Penny. And help us, each one of us now, to hear your voice speaking to us.

And I pray that what I say will be true and clear and will have the power of the Holy Spirit for all of us. And I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Amen. What is a Christian is the question that we're going to look at for the next few minutes. There are many answers to this question.

One answer that you might find is a Christian is simply a person who likes to do good and be helpful.

[1:01] Yesterday, over a cup of coffee, I was looking in the Times. I very rarely do this. I was looking in the births and marriages section of the Times.

And there was recorded the birth of Isaiah Hensley Fortescue or something like that. And they said they called him Isaiah because it was a name from the Bible and Christian people like to be helpful and do good.

Couldn't quite see the connection. But anyway, his name was Isaiah because they thought a Christian was somebody who likes to do good and be helpful. I think that's a rather old-fashioned take on Christianity.

It's not completely wrong. I hope Christians do like to do good and be helpful. But I don't think it hits the nail on the head. It is not the deepest truth about what a Christian is.

If you ask many people today, a Christian, they would say, particularly in a town like Brighton, is a homophobic bigot who is anti-scientific. And the papers would say, not fit for political office.

[2:02] I'm sorry to say that people think that. But it's not. I don't think it's an exaggeration. Some people have a very negative view of what it is to be a Christian.

And I'm sorry about that. It is unnecessarily negative. And it is rather ignorant. But people do think that. And I'd like to answer the question today by seeing what Jesus says.

A Christian is. And we're going to see what Jesus says from the little portion that Corinne read in Mark's Gospel. If you are the sort of person who has a Bible with you, please open it to Mark chapter 1, verses 14 to 20.

If you're not that sort of person, please don't worry. I'll try and explain it all as we go along. But I am going to try and answer the question from this bit of the Bible. So we had read to us in Mark's account, Mark's account of the life of Jesus, first chapter up near the beginning.

And I asked the question, when did this take place? When was it that it says after John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God?

[3:16] When did that happen? Well, there's a calendar for you. It's sort of A.D. 30, something like that. I'm not sure of the exact date, but very much around that sort of time.

So 2,000 years ago. And at that time, Roman soldiers occupied the area where Jesus was walking and living.

And you should know that the current king of that area was King Herod, who was not a genuine heir to the throne. He was what you call a pretender. And he was put there by the Romans.

So you just need to know that. There I've got a picture of King Herod in case you wanted to know what he looked like. Where did this take place? Well, you know this. It's over in what Europeans call the Middle East.

There's a little map of it. And the particular point where Jerusalem is, is down here. That's the capital city. And Jesus is headed north into Galilee.

[4:15] Jesus goes up north from the capital, Jerusalem. And we might think, why did he go up north? So the geography and the history matter to understanding what Jesus is saying.

You should know that at that point in Jewish history, they could look back on hundreds of years in which there had been a promise to the Jewish King David of a worldwide, global kingdom of peace, and right rule and plenty.

And that was the promise that I read right at the beginning. I don't know whether you heard me or whether you remember me reading right back at the beginning from the psalm, which says, A scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.

You love righteousness and hate wickedness. And many things like that describing the king, King David, or his offspring, that would be a forever king and that would be a global king, not reigning over a little bit of the world, but over the whole world.

And at the time of Jesus, that thought, with the Romans in occupation, that thought, and a pretend king on the throne, that thought had completely, that's where we're thinking of headquarters there, that had flopped.

[5:47] That had flopped. That had flopped. And the thought of King David with a worldwide, global kingdom of peace and righteousness and everything put right had gone.

So let's look at this story. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee. So why did he go into Galilee?

No, I'm getting ahead of myself. Why did he go into Galilee? Because it was too dangerous to be in Jerusalem. John had been put in prison. He ended up having his head cut off.

That was what happened down in the capital city. It was a dangerous area. And Jesus moves up north where he can be more free because it's a dangerous thing to do the sort of thing that John the Baptist did and tell people what God wanted.

The time has come, says Jesus. The kingdom of God is near, which is a very striking thing to say. This kingdom, which has been long promised and doesn't seem to have happened at all, is near.

[7:14] Repent and believe the good news, says Jesus. So John got put in prison by the pretend king, Herod. There's the pretend king.

Because being on the side of this kingdom is a costly business. As I said, it cost John the Baptist his head. But Jesus has not given up on the kingdom of God.

Amazingly and strikingly, he goes into Galilee and says, the kingdom of God is near. Really? The kingdom of God is near.

It is. When he comes, when Jesus comes, it is near. The time has come, he says.

Now, something has changed. All those years of history are going to be either reversed or fulfilled because something is going to happen. The kingdom, the time has come.

[8:18] The kingdom of God is near. And he says, there is a response from you on this. You need to repent and believe the good news. Now, it's a question, what does he mean by that?

Certainly believing it would have been something, wouldn't it? Believe that this promised kingdom is coming and it's near. And when Jesus comes, the kingdom comes near. He seems to bring the kingdom with him in some way.

And what does he mean by repent? It's to do with change. Let's explain a little bit more about that as we go along. So this is what's happening. And I'd like us to see what happened to these fishermen.

And so in case you were wondering what that background was before, it's a beach in Sri Lanka. Of course, I went to Sri Lanka and took that picture. But it will do a very nice background for a beach by the Sea of Galilee.

And we read that as Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw, there's Jesus walking. That's, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their net into the lake for they were fishermen.

[9:29] So there's Jesus walking along by the side and there's a fisherman doing what fishermen do. And Jesus sees them doing that. And he says to them, follow me.

Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men.

These are the first disciples. Follow me, he says. And it says, at once they left their nets. So the net ought to disappear.

It's not going to disappear. The whole thing's got stuck. Ah, no, let's go back. I think that will do.

They left their nets and followed him.

First example of people who responded to the message of Jesus. Follow me, he says. I'll make you fishers of men.

[10:31] And at once they followed him. They left their nets and followed him. So let's have, there's the two of them following him.

And what happens next? When he had gone a little further, he saw James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John in a boat. Let's see if we can put them in a boat. There they are. And they were preparing their nets.

Let's risk the nets. Yes, they're preparing their nets. And without delay, another immediate thing. Immediately, he called them. So let's, no, we're not going to get him called, are we?

Oh, dear. Well, he did, he called them and said, follow me. No, he didn't. It was, it say. He called them and they left their father Zebedee in the boat and the hired men and followed him.

So I think we're going to get the hired men. And we're going to get his father Zebedee, who I couldn't quite fit in the boat because it's confusing. He does say, follow me. And then the next thing, they leave all that.

[11:30] And there's four of them now following Jesus. And they've left behind their father, click, the hired men, the business, and everything.

And here is a first little picture, little example of what a Christian is. The first, if you like, the first four disciples, the first four followers.

So what can we learn from this? So I'm saying that what is a Christian? It's somebody who's like them. A disciple, a follower of Jesus.

So let's spell that out a little bit more. A Christian is a person who believes that Jesus announces this global key kingdom of God.

Remember the promise of old of the King David and ruling and everything being right and this huge, powerful kingdom. And Jesus says, I've got that.

[12:32] I'm the king of that kingdom. And the first step you need to do is to follow me. Believe and repent. And a Christian is somebody who believes that Jesus is this king of this kingdom and responds accordingly.

And this kingdom is global. It covers the whole of everything. It covers the whole of our lives. There is nothing that this kingdom does not touch upon.

And to respond to Jesus is to make a total response. Everything, Lord, I submit to you. Your kingdom comes first.

And the first thing is to believe that. And I think it was a big thing for them to believe. They'd say, we've got Roman soldiers here. It doesn't look, you know, you yourself, Lord Jesus, you don't have a palace or anything.

You don't seem to be a king. And yet you are. It was a big thing for them to believe. And it's a big thing for us to believe. But believe it we must if we are to be disciples.

[13:37] Second thing about a disciple. A disciple is someone who leaves work, family, old life to follow Jesus.

That's exactly what those brothers did, isn't it? James and John. It says, they left their father Zebedee. They left the boat. They left the hired men.

And they followed Jesus. And this is the call that Jesus makes. This is, I think, what he means by repent. Repent is a Jesus-shaped thing. And he says, you leave that stuff to follow me.

Now, it's not a sin to have a boat. It's not a sin to have a fishing business. It's not a sin to have a dad. It's not a sin to have people working for you. None of those things is bad.

None of those things is bad. And I should also say that in some cases, Jesus sent his disciples back exactly where they come from.

[14:36] They wanted to leave their family and follow him. And Jesus said, go back to your family. That's what being a disciple is for you. But having said that, he does insist that we follow him and leave go of those other things.

He does insist that we follow him and we leave go. The first thing in my life can no longer be my work.

The first thing in my life can no longer be my family. The first thing in my life cannot be anything other than Jesus. It's a big claim.

But that's the claim he makes on those who would be his disciples. Ladies and gentlemen, that is a costly thing. You have to leave go of some things.

I think some Christians wrestle with that all through their lives. But the principle of it is a simple thing. Jesus must come first. You know, but I've got my work to do.

[15:44] No, Jesus must come first. I've got my family to look up. Yeah, but Jesus must come first. First, that's what he says. Thirdly, a disciple is a person whose life is transformed by Jesus.

You notice what Jesus said? Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. He didn't say that to every disciple. Some disciples, he changed their names.

He said, you are Peter. Which way around was it? You are Simon. You will become Peter. He changed some people's names. But whatever it is, he takes a life and transforms it.

Coming to Jesus, you cannot go away the same person that you were when you came. Your life must be in his hands that he can mold and form and make you something different.

A person whose life is transformed by Jesus. He says, I will make you fishers of men. And we give Jesus as Lord, or we accept that Jesus as Lord, has the power and the right to do what he wants with us.

[16:55] To change us. To become people that we were not before. Follow me and I will make you something else. So, if you think of lots of examples, the one that came to my mind is the hymn writer, John Newton, who was a slave trader.

And he ran a slave ship. And his mother prayed for him. If I remember the story correctly, you can check it up. And at some point, he realized the depth of his sin, prayed to God, became a Christian, and then went on to become a hymn writer.

And an Anglican vicar. God does that sort of thing. God does that sort of thing. He changes us.

Fourthly and lastly, a Christian is somebody who is called personally by Jesus.

Do you see that as he walked along, he said to these guys, you, you, you two. What, me? No, him. You, follow me. And he says to Peter, he says to the other two, come, you, follow me.

And there is something quite personal and specific and one-to-one about this conversation. Jesus calls you.

[18:18] He knows you. He knows your name. And through his scripture, he is calling you today to follow him.

Christianity is not about religion, rituals. Might include some rituals.

I suppose we've had a ritual here this morning in a sense. But it's not about ritual. It's not about philosophy. It's not about the sort of things that you could discuss over a cup of coffee. Well, I see things this way.

I see things that way. Hegel thought this. Sartre thought that. It is a personal call to you to follow him.

It's not a lifestyle choice in the same way that you might say, well, I'd like to join a golf club. Well, I think I might go to church every now and again. It's not a thing or an ism, but a person.

[19:13] It is Jesus who says, follow me. So I can ask you this question. I hope you won't mind asking.

Would this be you? Are you a Christian? Are you a disciple? Have you heard Jesus say, follow me? Have you, in some sense, got up, left behind whatever it was, your boat, your nets, even perhaps your dad?

Your colleagues, for the sake of following him, have you done that? Would you like to? Maybe, as both Matt and Penny said, things have made them think through the course of the years.

Maybe today is a day that makes you think. Am I really a Christian? I thought I was. Perhaps I'm not. Perhaps I should become one. How can I come? I need to become a Christian. Would you like to become a Christian? Now, Jesus shows us the way how. It's just in those simple words. To believe and repent.

[20:23] Or, if you like, to leave go and to follow him.