

Is Jesus for Real?

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[0 : 00] On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, Let us go across to the other side. And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.

And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?

And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.

He said to them, Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?

Well, 2,000 years ago, the name Jesus was perhaps as common as the name George is today. And despite the fact that we are living, arguably, in what some are calling a post-Christian culture, I am guessing when most people hear the name Jesus today, they tend to think of a Jew who lived somewhere in the Middle East more than 2,000 years ago.

[1 : 23] To the Muslim, Jesus is nothing more than a great prophet. To the politically minded, Jesus was a zealous revolutionary for whom things went tragically wrong.

To others, Jesus was some kind of magician, a sort of first century dynamo. Jehovah's Witnesses see Jesus as the highest of all created beings.

And one scholar in the 1970s even argued quite seriously that the name Jesus was a code for a secret mushroom, and that Christianity arose around a sex cult that worshipped hallucinogenic mushrooms.

Now, you may not just subscribe to any of these views, but in all the confusion and controversy and second-hand opinions, you may just think to yourself, is Jesus for real?

Who exactly was he? It was estimated some years ago now that the total number of human beings that have lived on planet Earth is around 60 billion.

[2 : 42] Depressingly, the vast majority of us will have lived and died virtually unknown. Some of us will have left a ripple or two behind because of some notable achievements.

Emma Raducanu lives not far from here, and she certainly caused one or two ripples. Fewer still have impacted thousands, millions even, during and after their lifetime.

Some, perhaps, philosophers, scientists, world leaders, and founders of religious movements belong to an elite group consisting of just a handful at most.

Yet, in that elite group, Jesus stands out as unique, because no other human being in history has attracted such a combination of attention, whether devotion, criticism, adoration, or opposition.

For hundreds of years, his birth literally divided history into BC and AD. We are in the 2021st year since his birth.

- [4 : 00] The fact is, at any one given moment on this planet, millions of people are reading what he said and did while trying to apply his teaching to their lives.
- It is estimated that something like 2.2 billion people on this planet follow him. That's approximately 30% of the world's population. Apparently, between 1910 and 1950 alone, around 350 books were written about his life.
- Theatre productions and films have been made about him. Mel Gibson's controversial film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was and is the most successful religious movie of all time, making over \$600 million at the box office.
- Jesus is quite literally one in 60 billion. What I mean is, his impact on our world is such that we owe it to ourselves to think seriously about the question, is Jesus for real?
- So I want to commend a careful reading, or better still, study of Mark's Gospel. One of the four biographies of the life of Jesus Christ.
- [5 : 23] Not only will you not find a more historically reliable, more vivid and engaging account of who the real Jesus was and is, the first time I properly read Mark's Gospel, I was just blown away by its depiction of this man, Jesus Christ.
- I found him utterly captivating, and to be honest, still do, to this day, over 30 years later. If you want to answer the question, is Jesus for real, you can do no better than to read carefully and thoughtfully, and there I say prayerfully, Mark's Gospel.
- It would take a slow reader less than two hours to read it from beginning to end. One of the questions Mark addresses is, who is Jesus?
- And therefore, is he for real? The answer, in part, to that question, is that Jesus appears to be a person of immense power and authority.
- For example, evil spirits are terrified of him, and are compelled to obey the word of his command. Crowds of people are drawn to him, and are amazed at the sheer weight and authority with which he speaks.
- [6 : 53] It was literally like nothing they'd ever heard before. This is further compounded by the fact that he's able to heal all manner of sickness and disease, often with a word.
- He says to Peter and his brother Andrew, to James and his brother John, come, follow me, and these strong, hardened men drop everything and follow him.
- such was the sheer force of his personality. And not only does he demonstrate the reality of his claim to be able to actually forgive my sins and your sins, he even brings a 12-year-old girl out of death and back into life again, and gives her back to her parents, alive and well.
- Now, of course, at this point, you may be thinking, look, I don't believe in the tooth fairy, or Peter Pan, and I've even stopped trying to convince my children that Father Christmas exists.
- And I certainly don't think Jesus is for real. At least, not to an intelligent adult like myself. And that's fair enough.
- [8 : 12] But I want to point out to you that Mark is not just making this stuff up. We have it on good authority that Mark got his account of the events he records from Peter.
- So what we are reading in Mark's gospel is Peter's eyewitness testimony of actual, real events.
- I want to look at the account that was read a few moments ago. As Peter related the story, Mark was told, look, Mark, I remember it was evening that day.
- It was getting dark. Verse 35. We took Jesus along just as he was. Perhaps Peter recalls what Jesus was or was not wearing that very night.

Leaving the crowd behind, we'd gone to that boat. There were also other boats on the lake when it happened. Verse 36. Water came into the boat threatening to sink us.

[9 : 25] I remember seeing it. I was there. Verse 37. Jesus was sleeping with his head on a cushion. I could see it now. When we woke him.

Verse 38. These little yet very significant details suggest that we are not reading science fiction, nor myth, nor a fairy tale, but rather real eyewitness testimony of real events.

If you had been standing on the shore of the Lake of Galilee that evening, you might well have seen several boats struggling to make their way to the other side of that lake. So let's focus in on the storm on the rest of the events that happened that night.

Apparently, it was not unusual for a storm to arise suddenly on that very lake. In the 1990s, the legendary director Ridley Scott made a film called White Squall.

Set in the swinging 60s, it tells the true story of 13 teenage boys who go on a Caribbean sail and study cruise in a 92-foot sailing ship called the Albatross.

[10 : 45] All is well until on the return journey, the ship is hit by a white squall. A cataclysmic burst of wind and rain.

It's called this because it happens without warning, apparently. Meteorologists call it a microburst. And even though it lasted only 90 seconds, the Albatross capsized immediately, killing six of the crew.

The survivors were never the same after that experience. Well, that kind of reminds me of a situation the disciples faced in Mark chapter 4.

We know this because four of the fishermen were seasoned fishermen. Four of the disciples were seasoned fishermen. Yet they run to Jesus like frightened little children. In verse 37, Mark literally writes, it was a great storm.

Water was being tossed into the boat such as it was being filled. Now as all this is going on, the phrase that comes to my mind is, all hands on deck.

[12 : 00] You would expect everyone on board to be doing all they could to stop the boat from sinking. But the strange thing is that Peter remembers that Jesus, who had led them into the situation, according to verse 35, was sleeping on a cushion, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him.

Yet gripped by fear, his disciples run to him and say, teacher, teacher, don't you care that we are perishing? Verse 38.

For a moment, transport yourself back to that scene. Imagine you were there. Put yourself in the position of these disciples. It is dark.

You are soaked through to the skin. Your heart is pounding away in your chest. Everything is being tossed around you like a leaf in the wind.

And at any moment, the boat you are standing in feels like it's about to fall apart. But most of all, you are afraid.

[13 : 15] Because you're thinking to yourself, well, this is it. This is the end. But then out of that chaos and confusion, this man Jesus is roused from his slumber, and he stands up.

He rebukes the wind. Shut up. Can't you see I'm trying to talk? And then he addresses three words in our English translation to the waves.

Peace. Be still. He actually addresses the wind and the seas. And as you struggle to get your mind around what exactly is happening, all of a sudden, everything becomes completely and utterly calm.

In a matter of seconds, literally, you have gone from chaos and confusion to complete and utter stillness. And he says, stillness. Mark tells us in verse 37 that there was a great storm, and then in verse 39, he writes, there was a great calm.

Great storm, great calm. Not only has Jesus silenced the wind, which is amazing in and of itself, but simultaneously, he has caused the water to become mirror-like in its calmness.

[14 : 39] Next time you're on a boat, or maybe in the bath, try it. Just make sure no one is watching, otherwise it could be a little bit embarrassing. Then as if that were not enough, he turns and he says to you, what's the matter with you?

Why are you so afraid? Do you still not trust me? Don't you understand, verse 40, who I am? But personally, for me, the most sobering thing to my mind comes in verse 41.

Here we are told the disciples were terrified. Literally, they feared a great fear. After the storm has been calmed and the wind has stopped, haunting them with its howling, the disciples, we're told, are terrified.

They are perfectly safe now, by the way. We know that because they make it to the other side of the lake in chapter 5, verse 1. And yet, they're terrified. I hesitate to use this illustration in the week where Wayne Cousins was justly convicted and sentenced for the horrendous murder of Sarah Everard.

But imagine this. Imagine you're a young woman on your way home one night alone. you begin to suspect that someone is following you.

[16 : 12] So you walk a little bit faster. Finally, get into your front door with your key in hand. You go inside quickly, locking the door behind you, slowly catching your breath.

But then gradually, you begin to sense that someone is in the room with you who is far more dangerous than anyone you imagined outside in the street.

I hope to God you never ever have that experience, ever. And yet, that's a bit like what the disciples in this boat were feeling. they were afraid of the storm, verse 40, but now they are terrified of the one who is greater than any storm.

According to verse 40, they were afraid of what was outside the boat, the storm, but in verse 41, they become terrified of who is inside the boat with them, Jesus.

I wonder, have you ever thought about Jesus like that? The thing these followers of Jesus do get right is the question they ask in verse 41.

[17 : 27] You see it? Who then is this that even wind and the sea obey him? What on earth is going on here? What?

How? What's going on? Well, if you know your Bible, in the Old Testament part of the Bible, that's the first 39 books of the Bible, God alone, God Almighty himself alone controls the elements.

He alone commanded the wind and the seas in the book of Jonah as he sent a storm in pursuit of Jonah, his disobedient prophet, chapter 1, verse 4, the book of Jonah.

In Psalm 107, who was it that lifted up the waves of the sea and made the storm be still. Of course, it was their creator, God Almighty himself.

And yet here, at the end of Mark, chapter 4, we have seemingly a man, Jesus, doing what only God could do according to the Old Testament.

[18 : 35] How can this be? Well, if you remember nothing else from this morning, remember this. The simple answer is that at the heart of the Christian faith is the idea that Jesus is none other than God Almighty himself, clothed in human flesh and blood.

That's the truth at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus claims to be the visible expression of the invisible God. The fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ in bodily form.

The wonder of the Bible is that God became a man and walked this earth 2,000 years ago. That's what Advent, Christmas is all about. The calming of the storm is not so much about us or about how much faith we do or don't have.

It is about Jesus and who he really is. Yet, ironically, true faith will be most secure if we base it on this Jesus, the real Jesus.

Not the Jesus we like to think or imagine. The calming of the storm is here to teach us that this Jesus, the real Jesus, is big enough to cope with any situation you and I might find ourselves in.

[19 : 54] He alone, according to Mark, is qualified to deal with the social, economic, political, and relational problems of our world caused by people like you and me.

See, as you continue reading Mark's gospel, you discover he is also the one who is punished in my place and your place on the cross 2,000 years ago, offering us eternal life if we will just admit that we are rebels, guilty sinners who are incapable of saving ourselves.

The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that he alone is the one qualified to help us to save us. See, Jesus is greater than all our fears or failures, and our faith will be most stable if we centre it on who the real Jesus is.

And knowing the authentic Jesus better is what strengthens faith the most. The lesson is well put in the following song that pictures the disciples crying out in the midst of that storm.

Let me read to you the words of this song. Master, the tempest is raging, the billows are tossing high, the sky is overshadowed with blackness, no shelter or help is nigh.

[21 : 23] Carest thou not that we perish? How canst thou lie asleep when each moment so madly is threatening a grave in the angry deep?

Well, the songwriter then goes on to document the response of Jesus. He says this, the wind and the waves shall obey my will.

Peace, be still. Whether the wrath of the storm to sea or demon or men or whatever it be, no water can swallow the ship where lies, here it comes, the master of ocean and earth and skies.

They all shall sweetly obey my will. Peace, be still. Peace, be still. They all shall sweetly obey my will. Peace, peace, be still.

The real Jesus is not just some good moral teacher nor healer nor even some sort of Che Guevara revolutionary. He claims to be God almighty himself come in the flesh who took the punishment that you and I deserved on that cross 2000 years ago and rose again to offer us life eternal with him in the new heaven and the new earth.

[22 : 48] What that means is that you and I cannot just ignore him. We have to do something about him. John Stott was a great preacher, writer and arguably one of the most influential Christian statesmen of the 20th century.

His obituary described him as a man who shaped the faith of a generation. Two months short of his 17th birthday in 1938 he became a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

After hearing a clergyman preach on the question posed by Pontius Pilate in Matthew 27, what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?

Pilate uttered those words in Matthew 27. What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? To quote Stott, until that moment I didn't know I had to do anything with Jesus who is called Christ.

I wonder are you in that position here this morning? I want to say to you, you have to do something about Jesus. Well, before I close in a word of prayer, let me suggest a few things.

[24 : 05] First, keep asking your questions about Jesus. Someone has said that one question is more explosive than a thousand answers.

Keep asking questions until you settle on a right understanding of who this man Jesus is. Come with your questions. There are people here like Ben and Adrian and Simon and others who would be happy to answer your questions.

Keep asking those questions. Secondly, why not read one of the Gospels? I've got two copies of Mark's Gospel, which is my favourite Gospel. Sixteen chapters, less than two hours to read it through from beginning to end.

I'd love to give these away. All I'd ask is that you read it. Why not take a copy of Mark's Gospel and read it? Come and find me afterwards and I'll happily give it to you.

I know that here at Gracious Studies they run a course called Christianity Explored. It's a course based on Mark's Gospel that will help you to come to terms with the real Jesus.

[25 : 05] where you can ask all your questions in a friendly atmosphere. Why not join the course today? Talk to Ben if you'd like to do that. So you can keep investigating this man Jesus.

But perhaps you're ready here and now to begin to follow Jesus. Well I'm going to pray a prayer to help you do that. And if you want to echo the words of this prayer quietly in your own heart then please feel free to do that.

If you've been a Christian for a while it might be good just to recommit yourself to the Lord Jesus here this morning. But if you pray this prayer for the first time why not tell a Christian friend or someone you know and trust so they can get you some further help.

Let's bow our heads, close our eyes and pray together. Dear God, God, I know that I'm not worthy to be accepted by you.

I'm guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you. And I don't deserve your gift of life. I need your forgiveness.

[26 : 15] Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me so that I might be forgiven. thank you that he rose from death offering me new life.

Please forgive me and change me by your spirit from this day onwards so that I may live with Jesus as my king.

In his name we pray. Amen.