

Decisions

You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.

C. S. Lewis

So where do we go from here? I have attempted to show how three of the most common obstacles to Christian belief need not be obstacles at all. Rather, when carefully considered with a genuinely open mind, they can lead to a fresh awareness of the Christian faith as a set of beliefs that it is possible to hold with intellectual integrity. This is a long way from the easy dismissal of Christianity with which we began.

But where does that leave agnosticism? The simple answer is: faced with a massive problem. For if the arguments of preceding chapters have carried any force at all, the reader by now will have realized that agnosticism cannot long survive as a bolt-hole from making up our minds about the evidence for Christian belief.

In particular, the agnostic has to make up his mind about the person of Jesus Christ. The commonest response when faced with this question is to say something like, 'Well, of course, he was a good man and a courageous moral teacher. But as for all that stuff about being the Son of God – I'm not so sure . . .'

The problem with this view is that it can be no more than a temporary halting place. For the more we read the

accounts of Jesus' life and the reports of his sayings, the harder it becomes to remain equivocal. Why? Simply because the character, claims and teachings of Jesus force us to a decision: what shall we do with this man who claimed to be God?

Three decisions confront us if we are serious about the person of Jesus Christ. First, we need to decide whether he was who he said he was – whether we are prepared to accept his words about himself. Second, we must decide why he died – was it just a tragedy or was there more to it than that? And third, we must decide what our response ought to be. In these final pages, we shall look at each of these in turn, not with a view to sustaining an agnostic stance but to committing ourselves one way or the other. Make-your-mind-up time has arrived.

1. *Who Was Jesus?*

The Gospels are absolutely clear as to who Jesus was – the Son of God. Time after time, the writers affirm that he was not simply another holy man with a hot line to the Almighty but that he was God-made-flesh. Now, of course, it would be easy to dismiss this as impossible, as pre-scientific mumbo-jumbo. But once we embark on *that* road we are back into the dogmatic so-called 'scientific' world-view that rules out miracles as a matter of prior assumption. And for the reasons we noted in the last chapter, this will not stand up.

So we are left with a massive claim about which we have to make up our minds: was Jesus who he said he was? We might attempt to water down the enormity of such a claim by concentrating on his moral teaching. But this falls at the first hurdle. For the words of Jesus are all of a piece or they are nothing. The same Jesus who gave the moral precepts so widely accepted as inspiring is the one who declared himself to be the Son of God, equal

with God and having come from God. He claimed to forgive sins, heal the sick, raise the dead – all because God had given him the authority to do so. If such a man stepped into our midst today, we should think him either conceited beyond belief or just plain mad. Yet we think neither of these things about Jesus. In the words of C. S. Lewis, 'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell.'

Here, then, is the dilemma: do we accept all that Jesus said, or none of it? We can't pick and choose on the grounds that some bits make us uncomfortable or don't happen to fit with our world-view. We must either accept it all or reject it all. To quote C. S. Lewis again, 'Let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

But this merely leads to a second dilemma: what do we do with the Gospels? We have seen how difficult it is to regard them as unhistorical fictions made up by Christian propagandists. If that was their authors' intention, they are incredibly poor products. The Jesus of the Gospels is simply not the figure of whom propaganda is made. If the accounts of his life were intended to be that, the writers were unbelievably incompetent. And if that was the best they could manage, it is astonishing the Christian movement sprang up at all.

Yet it did spring up – around the belief that the man from Nazareth had risen from the dead and that his death and resurrection were somehow tied together in the purposes of God. It was not his moral teaching that provided the impetus for the birth of Christianity. Rather, it was around the contention – witnessed to by many hundreds of people – that he had risen from the dead and had

appeared to his followers that the movement began to grow. And so we arrive at a third dilemma: what to do with the resurrection? Given the argument of the last chapter, simply doing nothing is not an option. We have to accept the resurrection or reject it. That is the stark choice it puts before us.

2. Why Did Jesus Die?

It is impossible to be agnostic about the death of Jesus Christ for one simple reason: either it meant nothing or it meant everything. If the first, then countless millions throughout history have been labouring under a delusion. If the second, then we cannot remain neutral about it. Once again we find ourselves faced with a decision that refuses to go away.

What are the possibilities? If Jesus was no more than a sage-cum-martyr, then the most we can say is that his death inspired others in a way that no other death has. We have already seen how as early as thirty years or so after the crucifixion, 'large numbers' (Tacitus' phrase) were prepared to be tortured and killed rather than recant their Christian faith. The brutal fact is that if Jesus' death and the preaching of his followers was merely a self-delusion, the first Christians were – and millions since have been – living a lie. Even worse, those who had begun the lie must have known what they were doing and where it would lead. In other words, they must have been prepared to see lives wasted for a cause they knew to be a deceit.

Yet is this credible? From what we know of the first disciples, they were nothing like this. Immediately before and after Jesus' death they were terrified. To imagine that within the space of a few weeks they had turned into courageous preachers risking their lives for the gospel one minute, only to become cold-hearted cynics the next, willing to sacrifice their fellow believers for what they

knew to be a lie, is simply not believable. The evidence just does not fit.

We must look elsewhere, then, for explanations of Jesus' death. At one level, of course, it was the result of a political act. The Jewish leaders did not want him around any longer and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, saw no point in resisting them. At a more profound level, though, the crucifixion meant much more. And as the first Christians came to see, its significance was far greater than anyone had realized.

We can summarize the meaning of Christ's death in three words: *suffering, alienation and hope*. Taken together, they encompass its purpose and result. All Christian teaching about the crucifixion is embraced by them. In the space that remains we shall glimpse something of their force.

At its most obvious, the crucifixion was an act of unimaginable agony. To be nailed to a wooden cross for hours amounted to nothing less than torture. Yet Christians have insisted from the beginning that in and through the suffering of his Son, God was doing something unique for the human race. What was it?

The key to understanding why the *suffering* of Jesus was so important lies in a simple but crucial idea: that in his death Jesus was somehow taking upon himself the suffering of the world. This notion is not susceptible to scientific analysis. It is one of those ideas – like self-sacrificial love – which either makes sense or not. The reason why Christians have held it to be both sense-making and true is that it offers a way of understanding the crucifixion which addresses the most fundamental human reality of all – that we are born into a world of suffering and pain which seems to fly in the face of any notions of divine goodness, love or justice.

But Jesus the God-man hanging on the cross enables us to live in such a world and strive for its betterment without despair. As the Son of God, he experiences the ultimate

degradation and suffering, and so identifies himself and his heavenly Father with the lot of the human race. On the cross, God suffers as we suffer. He demonstrates his solidarity with us. There is no more poignant way of experiencing what it means to be human.

Viewed from this perspective, the death of Jesus begins to make sense. For how else could God identify with humanity unless he were to go through the realities of human existence to the end – through suffering to death itself? Christ's death thus ceases to be meaningless and starts to reveal the depths of God's love for his creatures. As St John put it in the third chapter of his Gospel: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3.16).

But it does not stop there. The crucified Christ does not simply suffer with us. The cross deals with a further fundamental human reality – that of *alienation*. 'Alienated from whom (or what)?' is the obvious next question. The answer is: alienation from God, from the world and from one another. St Augustine put it succinctly when he stated that in each of us there is a God-shaped hole which only God can fill. Why? Because he made us for himself and until we find our fulfilment and purposefulness in him, we shall simply thrash around for substitutes, be they materialism, sex, politics, revolution, good causes or whatever. Whether we like it or not, human beings are a profoundly alienated race.

But how does the death of Jesus relate to this? Here we need to go back to the notion of Jesus' solidarity with humanity. Almost his last words on the cross were: 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' Theologians have puzzled for millennia over the precise meaning of that cry of dereliction (as it is known). Theories abound. But for the moment the point we need to hold fast to is that just as Jesus mysteriously caught up our suffering into his own, so he took upon himself our alienation. Our separation from God, from others, from life itself, he

experienced for himself in his death and dying. He was the representative human being, facing in our place the horrors of 'separatedness' from truth, love, life. Can we even begin to grasp it?

Which brings us to *hope*. Jesus bearing our suffering and alienation is of a piece with this central theme of the Christian faith. A Christ who suffered as we do and who stands in our place is a tremendous thought. But the power of Jesus' death goes even further. As the title of a famous Puritan book put it, in the death of Christ we have the death of death itself. This does not mean, of course, that those who believe in him will never have to go through the process of mortal death. This is manifestly not the case. Rather, in going through human death and rising again, Jesus offered us hope for new life beyond the grave.

In this way we see how the crucifixion and resurrection are tied together. Jesus suffers pain, death and alienation as we do. But that is not the end. He conquers death; he defeats it; he destroys its power. He brings hope.

But, as we might expect, it is not quite as simple as that. There is the question of inbuilt human sinfulness – the innate tendency to prefer self above God, above others, above everything. Only in exceptional moments do we seem able to transcend this. The sad fact is that most of the time we are self-centred, choosing what suits *us* and ignoring God and our fellows. This, we find, brings us back to alienation – to be understood this time not merely as a sense of lostness but as a self-determined desire to have our own way as we quest for autonomy.

Jesus is blunt about the self-centred human condition we all share. It cuts us off from God, enthrones self and demotes others. We find ourselves trapped by it, unable to break free or even realize we *need* to. Left to ourselves we would spend our lives seeking ever-increasing self-fulfilment until it killed us (quite literally).

But it does not have to be that way. The death of Christ makes a difference. We can experience freedom from this false quest through faith in the crucified and risen One. Such a choice will not be easy (and certainly not cheap since the cost was borne by Christ himself). We shall find that the new life of which Jesus spoke has its obstacles and problems. Those evangelists who promise health, wealth and happiness if only we will accept their gospel are promising something that Jesus refused to offer.

What he does hold out, however, is something infinitely more valuable: the promise of relationship with God. This is no trivial matter. It deserves our serious consideration. The question is: what will be our response?

3. What Shall I Do about This Man?

In my experience, the greatest obstacle to Christian belief is not intellectual or moral. It is fear. Fear of committing oneself to something which might change one's life. And that is exactly what faith in Jesus Christ will do. It will not leave us alone to continue as if nothing had happened. It will grab us and turn our lives upside down. It will transform us from searching for meaning, truth and purpose into people who have found these. It will give us new life, new horizons, new challenges. But most of all, it will give us relationship with the One who made us, who died for us and who rose for us. And in doing so it will liberate us to love Christ, ourselves and others.

This is the choice that faces each of us and which demands a response. We can equivocate no longer. Agnosticism must give way either to atheism or to faith. The bolt-hole is shut: the decision awaits.