

Sandy Parish Church    Revd Huw Davies

## **The Big Puzzle 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Thank you for joining me here again at Sandy Parish Church as we think about the impact Jesus has made upon our world.

I don't know whether you enjoy quizzes and puzzles. My mother, who's 92, keeps her brain alive with the crosswords each week and she loves doing jigsaws. Many of you, I know, enjoy going to the quiz, whether it's the pub quiz or the Leprosy Mission quiz. Quizzes can be great fun; sometimes they ask questions that are impossible to answer, but one of the most important questions that we could ever ask is 'why is Jesus important in this world of ours?'

We talked last week about kindness and showing kindness to one another. Why is it that we invoke Jesus into this equation when as we said perhaps it's just human to be kind to one another, to look after the lost and the broken? But actually that's also counterintuitive to being human. One reason we bring Jesus into this equation is because he was so different to everybody else and the impact that he has had upon the world is extraordinary. Whether we think of him as more than a man is neither here nor there for the moment, just look at the impact he has had upon the nations of the world.

Normally when someone dies, the impact that they have upon the world immediately begins to recede into history but Jesus inverted that human trajectory. On the day of Jesus's death it looked as though his impact upon the world was going to be minimal. Whatever influence he had had upon the people would surely die with him but Jesus inverted that trend, bucked the trend. A hundred years after his death he was more influential than the time of his death; 500 years, and he was so influential it was taking over the Roman Empire; a thousand years, and it was becoming an influence across all the known world and 2000 years later it is still even more influential than ever before, affecting more followers than ever.

If someone's legacy would outlast their life it usually becomes apparent when they die. If there was a prize for those most likely to succeed you would not put your money on Jesus.

His life and his teaching drew men to follow him. He made history by starting in such a humble place in a spirit of love and acceptance for all. Stirring up people, he deliberately placed himself on a collision course with Rome, the great empire of the day, and surely he would be crushed by it. And so he was, crushed like a gnat. And yet Jesus's vision of life continues to haunt and to challenge humanity. His influence has swept over history. It's an inspiration and an influence on art and music and science and government, education. He taught about human beings, about dignity, about compassion, forgiveness and hope that have been unparalleled in their human history. Jesus might be said to be the most familiar figure and yet the most unfamiliar but his impact upon the world is immense.

Great leaders and great men have sometimes tried to find immortality in naming places after themselves so you find Caesar named Caesarea, find Alexander named Alexandria but Jesus, he didn't name any cities, but his followers, they gave names to cities. What about St. Petersburg or Peterborough or Johannesburg, after a man named John who was one of his disciples, or San Francisco named after St. Francis who was one of Jesus's followers a thousand years after his death.

Powerful regimes often try to maintain their importance by naming calendar after themselves. The Roman emperors would start the calendar from the date that Rome was established and founded. After the French revolution they tried to rename the calendar with that date the main starting date. The idea of Jesus trying to impose a new calendar upon the world would have been laughable. The beginning of his ministry was calculated as in the ancient days by who was in charge, who was the king, who was the ruler at the time. And so we find in the Gospels its mentioned of Jesus that it was in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene. That's how they did the calendars, after all the great men. This year, when he was in charge.

Jesus came from obscurity and lasted just the blink of an eye in terms of human history and yet today, whenever we look at the calendar, whenever we mark a man's birth and his death and the time in between we mark it according to the life of Jesus. How is it that this man could become the dividing line of history?

Famous people often seek to preserve a legacy by having other people named after them. On the day after Jesus's death no-one knew his name apart from the small circle of friends and family of Jesus but today, everybody knows his name or the names of his followers. His followers live on in names like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Simon, Mary, Joanna. No-one knows what Jesus looked like, and yet there have been more paintings and more art drawn about Jesus than almost any other subject in the world. We don't have any physical description of him, and yet he is one of the most frequent subjects of art. Songs about him have been sung by too many artists to name, from the first song listed by the Apostle Paul in the letter to the Philippians all the way through to today where there is Justin Bieber's 'Under the Mistletoe' released a few Christmases ago or last year at Glastonbury, Stormzy singing 'Blinded by His Grace'.

In Jesus's name desperate people pray, grateful people worship, angry people swear. From christenings to weddings to sick rooms to funerals, in Jesus's name people are hatched, matched, patched and dispatched. From the Dark Ages to the modern day he will not go away. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelican wrote, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about Jesus of Nazareth he has been the dominant figure in western culture for almost 20 centuries." We live in a world where Jesus's impact is immense. Even if his name goes unmentioned we take it for granted but our world has been shaped by him.

See what difference it would make if Jesus had never come, how different the world would be. Childhood would be different. A book by historian O M Bakky, a study called "When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity" he noted that in the Roman Empire children didn't get named until they were eight days old. Up until then there was a chance that the infant might die or that you would discover that the child was not perfectly formed or maybe not the right gender, and you can guess which gender that would be. The custom was that you would take a child who you didn't want for any reason and you would put them outside on the mountainside to die. That changed because of Jesus. Now everyone is valued. When Jesus said draw the little children to come unto me, not one of them will be lost, then it was that orphanages, that caring for the lost and the smallest.

Jesus never married, yet the impact and the influence on the way that women are treated in our world is huge. The way that he treated women and called his disciples and followers to treat women meant that women joined this new movement in numbers. They were respected, they had rights. In fact the church was sometimes in literature disparaged by its opponents – fit only for women.

Jesus's teaching about sexuality would lead to the dissolution of the double standards that were so prevalent in those days in Roman law.

Jesus never wrote a book and yet he calls us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind. When in the Dark Ages, the classical world, literature was destroyed in so many places it was the community of Jesus, the monks and the nuns, that preserved them. In time it was the movement that he started that would lead to the setting up of libraries across the world, to the guilds of learning, to the establishment of the great universities, Oxford and Cambridge. The western system of education that we have today was set up in his name and by his followers. The insistence that everybody should have the right to be literate came from the belief that to read Jesus's words would be important for people. Understanding this Jesus who praised truth, who told his followers that the Holy Spirit would come, that we might learn and discover more.

Will you take a fresh look at what Jesus actually said? What people said about him? Will you read the gospels afresh, with new eyes? Will you come to see what the eye witness said about him? Will you allow him to speak to your heart? Will you allow him to calm the storms in your life? Will you allow him to heal the hurts? Will you allow him to bring new life? Will you invite him into your heart and into your mind? Will you become a follower of Jesus with your whole heart, not put off by the things that you heard second hand, but speak to him in the quietness of the night? Speak to him in your own heart, invite him?

Great prayer that so many people have prayed, that I prayed all those years ago; Lord, I really don't know if you're there or not, but if you are I would invite you to come and make yourself known to me. Jesus very graciously over the next months began to become more and more real to my heart and has influenced and touched my life all the way through, and I'm glad of it. I have seen him transform people's lives. I have seen people leave drugs and abuse. I have seen people recover. I have seen people forgive. I have seen people find vision for their life. I have seen the disappointed given fresh vision. I have seen the unemployed find work. I have seen marriages put back together again. I have seen children survive difficult families. I have seen communities changed. I pray that God would give you the same peace, that you would find his joy, that you would find the vision, that you would find the dreams, that you would discover his presence, just as many other people have before you and that he would lead you into life in all its fullness with no regret but a future that is assured.

And so may God bless you and make his face to shine upon you, be gracious to you, grant you his strength, his peace, his presence every day.