

21st Feb - Lent 1 - What is a Christian

I once sat on the dreaded DAC and introduced myself as an “architect”. Whereupon another member said - are you? Are you registered with the RIBA. I said, no, I just did all the degrees and study, and they said - you can't call yourself an architect, it's a protected name - it's a profession.

So I'm a training architect, or someone who studied architecture.

I wish the same were true when it came to calling yourself a Christian.

Anyone can call themselves a Christian - and it doesn't matter - there's no cost - expect to everyone else who calls themselves Christian

When in Pakistan, people told me Christianity was rubbish, because we were all degenerate and loose moralled - I said - really how do you know? And they said - look at Madonna, look at your pop stars. And I said - but they're not Christian!
And they replied - but you are a Christian country, so they must be.

To them - being English or American made you a Christian.
But is being a Christian like having a nationality? - is it to do with where we're born or live or which passport we have?

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So I thought Lent was a good time to explore a bit what it means to be a Christian.
And I thought I'd just start this week by getting us to think about the question.

So what do you think makes someone a Christian? Should I put you in breakout groups, or just take hands up?

Here's some of the things you might say -

It's about what we believe - well, yes, and no. St James says - the devil believes in God - so it's not just about believing. And what you believe - or how you understand it, varies a lot - I mean I'm not aware of a test or exam - so what I mean when I say I believe in Jesus - that's different to what you mean. And what about those who can't understand - who are too young, or don't have the mental grasp - are they not allowed to be Christians. It's not simply belief.

It's about going to church or being in church. - well yes and no, being in a car park doesn't make you a car. I can't tell what people are thinking while they're in church.

It's about doing the right things - being kind and nice - = well yes, but lots of Christians don't do the right things, and but lots of people who are kind and nice wouldn't call themselves Christians,.

It's about following Jesus - yes, but that seems to look very different for lots of people - so in Africa following Jesus means not drinking alcohol, whilst in Russia following Jesus means praying in front of icons, and for Catholics following Jesus means accepting the Pope as the head of the church, and for the serpent handling churches in America - being a follower means being able to pick poisoned snakes and survive - like it says in the end of Mark's gospel.

Ok Simon - being a Christian is someone who's baptised! In fact at one time, the idea that only the baptised went to heaven was so strong that mothers would beg vicars to baptise their dead children. This was in Victorian times. And eventually the church of England had to write a law, a canon, to specifically forbid the baptism of dead infants.
But really, Jesus said to the thief on the cross next to him - today you will be with me in paradise. And there was no time for him to be baptised. Yet we love to make the church a club with rules of

who's in and who's out. We love to think that it must be easy to define who's a Christian and who's not.

But the truth is - being a christian is not an ideology like a political party, its not a theory like a scientific hypotheses, which we accept with the evidence we have, adn its not to do with certain things we do - like gardening makes you a gardener...

It is in fact a mixture of all of these and more...

Which is why its vague enough for people to do terrible things in its name, and for people to be very bad adverts for it. And all I can say - Donald Trump is not the same sort of Christian as me.

Its interesting that this very vague faith, comes from one of the most prescribed faiths on the planet. Judaism is all about begin obvious about who belongs and who doesn't. Think of the skull cap and rules about what you eat and what you wear and how you observe the sabbath. Its like the whole thing is there so you cannot possibly keep it a secret. There are very particular definitions of what makes someone Jewish - as a nation or race, as a believer, and even levels of orthodoxy.

Yet the early followers of Jesus, and those who led the movement, kept the barriers deliberately low - what do they agree at the 2nd Jerusalem council in Acts -

Gentile converts to Christianity

were not obligated to keep most of the fasts, or other specific rituals,

Did not have to have circumcision of males. Basically they were let off most of Jewish practice.

The only bit they did keep was the the ban on unclean meat - you know, pork and that stuff.

So odd isn't it, we have taken even that low hurdle down! You can eat black pudding and be a Christian!

But , although its is very vague, and hard to know where the edges are - there are things at the core - certain things we do do, because we're christian

And there are ways that we try to live, because we're Christian

And there are things we believe, because we're a Christian

None of these are to be taken as proof that someone is or isn't a Christian, but they do help us to shape our identity, and what it is we belong to. Because belonging, to each other adn to God, is at the heart of the faith - relationship.

So that brings me to finish today with the first thing that unites all Christians - despite all our varieties

All Christians have a belief in God.

And I'm using shorthand - after all "God" in the Bible is called Elohim, Lord, and Yahweh

I'm trying to say that there is a being - beyond male and female, beyond our understanding - a thing, a person, who created all that there is.

And the shorthand name for that is - God.

And we believe there is only 1. To have more than one is to have competition, good vs bad, city vs united, and or possibly a hierarchy - looking at hinduism or the greeks and romans - there are greater and lesser ones - those who are more god like and less godlike. That is not really compatible with Christianity.

And you might not think its saying very much, so far, to say that Christians have an awareness of one outside force, a creator, yet it implies a purpose for all that is, was, or is to come. It implies all of this is here for a reason, not just by chance or accident. It implies that there is a relationship between a creator and their creation - and we will go further to say its a relationship of love.

That's why the lots of Gods, or all religions are the same, doesn't really wash. The claim of the monotheistic (one god) faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - is that there is one God who is in

love with their creation. Hinduism has the world made by mistake, Greek Gods made humans to be their slaves - its telling a different story. Ours is about a sacred romance.

One God - a heavenly father, who created all that there is.

This first week of lent, lets spend some time being aware of that - that this is not random, that we are not random. That God loves us, knows us, made us with care and attention. And just spend a short time each day, reminding yourself of that.