



1. **IT'S JUST GOOD NEWS**

First of all, I have a confession to make.

There is another book that has been around a lot longer than this one, and it has exactly the same aim: to make you familiar with who Jesus Christ was and why he is of absolute importance to everyone who has ever lived and ever will live.

The person behind this other book is infinitely more gifted than I am, and the book's scope is admittedly superior to the one you're currently holding. Copies are readily available not only on the internet, in book stores and in libraries, but also in hotel rooms the world over, and it is so popular that parts of it have been translated into over 2,500 languages.

Actually, I'd better make that two confessions. The second is that I didn't have a particularly religious upbringing myself. In fact, my experience of Christianity was limited to a few dull sermons, slightly spooky people in strange garments hanging about in dank halls and religious education lessons during which I attempted to find references to rugby in the Bible.

Christianity was worse than boring: it was a fiction. Jesus walking on water, the three wise men, the feeding of the five thousand, Father Christmas and Winnie the Pooh were all mixed up in my mind together. They were all make-believe, best left in the nursery.

So I was shocked when I discovered that my older brother George had become a Christian. I remember telling him in no uncertain terms exactly what I thought about God and everything connected with God. To his credit, George didn't respond in kind. Instead, he pointed me to a single sentence in the Bible, the very first sentence of Mark chapter 1:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ...

He explained that the word "gospel" simply means "good news". "Rico," he said, "you don't understand Christianity. You think it's all about church, men in dresses, obeying rules and beautiful old buildings, but it's not. It's just good news. Good news about Jesus Christ."

Even my time in church, however, had brought me no closer to knowing what this "good news about Jesus Christ" actually was. In fact, if I could hand the book you're now holding to the person I was thirty-odd years ago, that person would have dismissed it straight away.

He wouldn't even have given it the benefit of the doubt, which is strange because – as I've since discovered – Jesus Christ is able to provide satisfying answers to questions that were endlessly troubling to me. How can I be content? Is there any meaning to life? Is there life after death? Does God really exist or did we just make him up ourselves? If God exists, why is the world so full of injustice?

I suppose most of us already have an opinion about God.

Some people look at the world, with all its suffering, and reject God out of hand. But other people have an inkling that yes, God probably does exist. They're not sure what He/She/It is like, but having seen the incredible scale and diversity of our universe, not to mention the beautiful form and function of our own minds and bodies, together with our inbuilt (and sometimes very inconvenient) sense of right and wrong, it seems like a reasonable proposition.

The British astronomer Sir James Jeans certainly reached that conclusion. He wrote, "The universe appears to have been designed by a pure mathematician." For him, the breathtaking order of our universe – from the tiniest blood cell to the most distant galaxies – points to the existence of a master planner.

Tom Stoppard, one of the most celebrated and intellectually rigorous playwrights of our time, wrote a play called *Jumpers*. When asked to talk about the play's theme, Stoppard said:

A straight line of evolution from amino acid all the way through to Shakespeare's sonnets – that strikes me as possible, but a very long shot. Why back such an outsider? However preposterous the idea of God is, it seems to have an edge of plausibility.

"Atheism is a crutch for those who can't accept the reality of God", one of his characters says.

One other factor that has led some people to feel that God might exist is the human sense of loneliness, emptiness and restlessness, not to mention our sense of the infinite. That's why the background story of *The Matrix* is so ingenious: it feels like it might be true. In the film, Morpheus tells Neo:

Let me tell you why you are here. It's because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. There is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

And it often seems as if nothing we do stops us feeling that way. A great job isn't enough. The car we've always wanted isn't enough. Friends aren't enough. Marriage and money aren't enough. Thom Yorke of the band Radiohead, in an interview with the *New Musical Express*, was asked about his ambitions:

Ambitious for what? What for? I thought when I got to where I wanted to be everything would be different. I'd be somewhere else. I thought it'd be all white fluffy clouds. And then I got there. And I'm still here.

The interviewer asked him why he carried on making music, even though he'd already achieved the critical and commercial success he hoped for. "It's filling the hole. That's all anyone does." To the question, "What happens to the hole?", Yorke paused a long time before answering: "It's still there."

What Morpheus and Thom Yorke describe is nothing new. Augustine, writing in the fifth century, suggested a reason for this sense of "wrongness" in our lives: "O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you." Could he be right?

Having a vague sense that God might exist is one thing. According to recent polls, between 70 and 80 per cent of people in the UK have just that vague sense. But to believe that God actually cares intimately for those he

has created probably seems a bit far-fetched to many. However, that is the claim the Bible makes. Furthermore, the Bible says, we can know God personally.

Imagine that you wanted to get to know the Queen personally. You could try writing a letter, or perhaps ringing Buckingham Palace, or you could try standing outside the palace gates with a very big sign. I don't recommend flying a light aircraft into her garden, because the last person who tried that – funnily enough, an author trying to get some free publicity for his book – got arrested.

The fact is, you wouldn't get very far with any of these approaches. Your only chance would be if she decided she wanted to meet you, and introduced herself personally. And that is exactly what the Bible says God has done in Jesus Christ. That's the beginning of the good news Mark has for us. It tells us that God wants to meet us, in person, and the life and death of Jesus Christ is the way he's chosen to do it.

Our choice

Now, if the Bible's claim is true – that our creator wants to meet us through Jesus Christ – then that would affect all of us, whether we like it or not. Of course, we could choose to avoid investigating this claim. Alternatively, we could choose to examine the claim to see if it is true. But I am duty-bound to say that each of these choices will have serious implications for us.

A few years ago, a London newspaper conducted a revealing experiment. They had a person stand outside Oxford Circus underground station and offer people

leaflets. On each was written a simple instruction: Bring this piece of paper back to the person who gave it to you and they will give you £5. People swarmed by, and lots actually took the leaflet, but in three hours only eleven came back. Apparently, most of us automatically assume that these bits of paper will be of no real interest, that they won't do us any good. So we either don't bother to read them, or we refuse to believe them.

My only plea is that you don't make that assumption. Don't assume that you've heard it all before, and that reading the Bible will be of no use to you. Instead, I ask you simply to give it the benefit of the doubt as we focus on one book of the Bible, a book named after its author, Mark. It's an accurate account of one life, Jesus' life, written with the insight of a man who spent years by Jesus' side.¹ (For more on why we can trust the Bible, see the chapter in *If you could ask God one question* by Paul Williams and Barry Cooper.)

By making time to read Mark, you may begin to see – as I did – that Jesus Christ is the most conclusive proof anyone could have, not only that God exists, but also that he made you and that he cares passionately for you. In fact, Jesus answers all the difficult questions we posed a few paragraphs ago.

And if those kinds of answers frighten you, then, as they say before the football scores on the news, “look away now...”

¹ Mark was guided as he wrote by an actual eyewitness of the events he describes. The evidence suggests that the eyewitness was a man called Peter, a close friend of Jesus. As we're about to see, Peter plays a key role in the events that are about to unfold.