



Edward Gibbon, in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, wrote that "the different religions of the Roman Empire were to the people all equally true, to the philosophers all equally false and to the magistrates all equally useful."

Not a lot changes. For me at university, Christianity was fine as long as it was not talked about, knew its place and did not interfere with one's life, and did not make unreasonable truth claims that might seem to matter. It could be true, but it should not be so bad mannered as to say so.

All that changed, and despite vast struggles and frequent slips and failures, the reality of Jesus Christ does not and will not go away.

Obviously I am a trifle invested in that truth now, but I would still be so if I had remained in the oil industry, or anything else. Although I might be richer! Yet the challenges to Christian faith have not changed much in the last 300 years. Take four:

- Truth. Can Christian faith really be held by 21st century men and women who are committed to rigorous scientific and rational thinking?

- Power. Is not Christian faith merely a vestige of the power of an institution centuries old and out of date. Has not the 21st century reached a place where such institutions have been shown to be belonging to a bygone era, desperately clinging to former glory and power?

- Experience. Has not the experience of so many across the generations who have suffered and endured great pain shown the folly of Christianity holding out a God who is all powerful and loving?

- Autonomy. Is not the 21st century the time to throw off the shackles of an overarching system which dictates to individuals how to behave and act? Do not 21st century men and women have the right to define themselves?

You might be here tonight and associate your doubts about Christianity in any of the above categories, or more. Let's be under no illusions - those in the corner against Christian faith having relevance to the 21st century seem to be increasing in number and conviction.

If I had time I would like to address each one of those objections in detail. I have limited time (and limited ability!)

However in answer to this question I want to look at some words Jesus Christ first said the night before his own torture and execution. Talking to the frightened and confused people who followed him, his disciples, who saw the whole purpose of their lives about to be eliminated, the cause to which they were committed on the point of extinction, he said "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me."

He said "I am." Christianity is about a person – Jesus – and about knowing and being known by him. The institution and religion of Christianity only

have relevance in as much as they reflect the one we are orientated around. In fact one of the biggest questions for the church is to ask whether Jesus Christ truly makes the difference to how we act.

Pope Francis spoke last autumn about too many churches being made up of practical atheists. We name the name of Christ but we don't let him change our actions. Above all the questions about religion and faith there is this one man, Jesus of Nazareth, who stands before us and bids us come to him.

Nobody could call WH Auden a conventional Christian. But, as one writer said of Auden in 1939 "he fell in love with" Jesus of Nazareth (not only him, of course, but that is a different story). But he fell in love with Jesus, and in much of what he wrote and struggled with after that he sought to make sense of Jesus, and to bring together the world in which he lived with the living presence of Jesus Christ.

A poem I read recently which struck me deeply was the one we heard earlier. It is full of Audenesque allusions and capital letters, and I have neither the time nor the skill to go into them. But it spoke deeply to me of why I am a Christian in the 21st century.

1. The Way

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

There is nothing predictable about being a disciple of Jesus.

Predictability would have been to go on in the oil industry, and yet God suddenly breaks in and he does that to all of us in all areas of life and says no come this way, it may not be to ordination it may be to any kind of way. He says look at this – follow me. Jesus says, 'Follow me, I am the Way.'

In John 14 disciples who thought they were heading for a successful revolution and power found themselves facing defeat without battle. And three days later found themselves dealing with Jesus resurrected, the greatest news for all humanity in all of history.

In our autonomy every way seems open to us. But the following of any way turns into one way, the way of loss and sorrow, and eventual defeat at the hands of death. Our weaknesses betray us and we betray ourselves, God and others, the bible calls that sin.

That sin leads to great suffering. The lust for power in the Middle East, the hordes of fear driven refugees, for whom, in the words of the poet Warsan Shire "Home is the mouth of a shark" and "the water is safer than the land", those struggling people to whom we are called to show mercy and grace and love. Our own personal struggles and suffering come back to a humanity that has cut itself off from God by pursuing autonomy.

To us Jesus comes not as a magician from outside the situation - much as we may imagine that to be good - but as one who comes to us alongside us, with us. He is Emmanuel - God with us.

In the DRC in a refugee camp, surrounded by terrible suffering as I fumbled for words of support and, feebly making time to think, quoted the letter to the Hebrews where it says “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” people began to sing and rejoice. They knew and needed only reminding that Jesus was with them. When our daughter died, we knew above everything that in the midst of terrible pain and grief Jesus was still there, to be railed against, to be turned from, to be turned to, clutched, grasped, begged, rejected, but always there.

Jesus doesn't offer the 21st century an apologetic on suffering. As if there were some easy answers that could answer our cries of where God was when it most hurt. What he does is come into this world and make our cries of being abandoned in pain and suffering his own cries. His cry on the cross: 'My God my God why have you forsaken me'.

And if we offer him our autonomy, if we surrender it into his hands, we find a way in the midst of terrors and trials that is life transforming and world transforming. The call of Jesus to every human being is for purpose, not just drifting; to be a revolutionary without weapons; to be those who face the worst of suffering and, known individually by God, change the world in which we live.

What an incredible purpose it is to which we are called to be a revolution without weapons. To change this bitter, dark world; that is the call of Christ to everyone here. As Auden says, “When in the Land of Unlikeness there are rare beasts and unique adventures.”

2. He is the Truth

Auden says 'He is the Truth'

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

So Jesus invites me and you, every single one of you, to come to him and encounter him. For he is not simply a man of history, but as the New Testament testifies, one who is was dead but is alive, and alive to meet with you and me today. This of course is utterly reliant on the facts of the resurrection. I am totally persuaded of this as a historical fact - and I believe that if you were to have a serious look at the evidence you would be too. Christianity is completely credible as a faith. It is true, but far more than that it is centred on loving the living Jesus who is truth itself.

Because of this Jesus, we completely miss it when we equate Christian faith with power and prestige, with influence and investment. Jesus Christ was not one who got on well with the people of power. He was not an easy person to have to supper if you were in a position of influence.

If you ask me about the primary place I see the relevance of faith for the 21st century I would take you not first to the House of Lords, or the great cathedrals (wonderful places as they are) - but I would take you to the room where I sat with women who had been trafficked for the sex trade yet who had found in the love of Christ one who had come to them, the weary and heavy laden, in the lives of a group of volunteers who had embodied his life and commitment.

I would take you to the young offenders' institute where I met young men who had found forgiveness and peace from this Jesus whose love and redemption of their lives had changed everything. More than that they found truth itself, living and active in their lives. They found a home, a place prepared for them, a welcome.

I remember one Christmas Day, when I was first a curate, going on an eight hour journey to the place we would spend the next week on holiday. The drive was long, the weather terrible, down to C-12. We arrived, and there were the rest of the family, the lights were on, the fire lit, the house warm, a comfortable bed, Christmas dinner the next day, and happy company. I grew up in a family that was never like that, and the pleasure of that arrival remains with me.

Yet the welcome Jesus offers us when we turn to Him is infinitely greater: not mere comfort and warmth but an eternity of extraordinary exploration of love, in a place in which we are known, the City of God.

3. He is the life

He says 'I am the Life'

He is the Life says Auden.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

In the 21st century we don't really understand freedom. For we imagine that freedom is the ability or capacity to do whatever we want. This is why we prize our autonomy so highly, and regard any curtailing of our 'right' to choose as a flagrant attack on our freedom. But Christian faith says something different. It says that the way to true life and living is found in following the way of Jesus Christ.

Jesus offers us this gift of belonging to something far bigger than ourselves. It takes from us the burden of having to work out how we should live on our own in a cold, dark world. Instead we come to learn from him, to trust him, to submit to him - knowing that this one we come to loves us and has the best way for us. To do what Jesus requires is always the best thing anyone can ever do at any point in their lives. It is to join a

celebration of life, to be fully human when we love Him in the World of the Flesh, to be challenged beyond what we can imagine

In all this Jesus invites us to a completely different way of seeing things and experiencing things rather than just hit all the balls back to us that we serve - thinking they are all aces - with what we think are highly sophisticated arguments against faith in the 21st century.

Rather than ourselves and our own objections and questions being central, he asks us to answer his questions, his objections and his perspective on our lives and our 21st century thinking.

And I think we find in the light of this our needs are different than we first thought. Our greatest problem is not our limitations or our mortality. Our greatest problem is our isolation.

We are isolated from each other and from God. Autonomy does that.

This has always been our greatest problem,

The point of faith in the 21st century is the same as faith in the fifteenth century as it was in the fourth century. That we might know Jesus Christ, and in knowing Jesus Christ work for the healing of the world, from the bottom up, through the power of the one who shares our pain and suffers for us, and calls us to find our meaning not in finding our own way, but through following him.

And tonight, amongst us, there comes this Jesus. Inviting each one of us to come to him, to receive rest for our weary souls, and to learn his ways of grace and life, life that is fuller than we can imagine, where “all its occasions shall dance for joy”.

Accept that invitation. I've no idea where it will lead. Pursue it, it opens a door to a new life, one most utterly suitable for the 21st century.

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