

## ***What is Christianity?***

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Imagine someone watching, over a period of about one year, the things that happen in a Christian church. They would be aware that one day of the week had special significance. Particularly if they were observing what happens in a historically Christian country, they would notice that Sunday is seen as important for meeting and praying. They would see that Christians met to sing and speak to a God whom they describe as the maker of all things and the judge of all things, and that they knelt or bowed in the presence of this God, thanking him and acknowledging their failures and wickedness. They would see that extracts from a holy book were read in public and that instruction was given by leaders of the congregation in how to understand this book. They would perhaps notice that most of the prayers ended with words referring to someone called Jesus Christ, and describing him as 'Lord'. They would see that at different seasons Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus and also commemorated his death and his miraculous return from death. Sometimes they would hear prayers and blessings mentioning 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'. And finally, they would see that new members were brought into the community by a ceremony of pouring water on them or immersing them in water, and that the most regular action performed by communities of different kinds was the blessing and sharing of bread and wine. They would notice, perhaps with bewilderment or even shock, that this sharing of bread and wine was described as sharing the body and blood of Jesus.

In what I wish to say, I am trying to think what questions might arise for someone looking at Christians from the outside in the way I have just imagined. These may or may not be the questions you have. But perhaps the attempt to answer these questions will help bring other questions more clearly into focus.

1.

Let me begin with the most obvious features of Christian prayer. We pray 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. And the best-known of all Christian prayers begins with the words 'Our Father in heaven'. These belong together. Probably the most important Christian belief is that we are given the right to speak to God in exactly the same way that Jesus did, because the life, the power, the Spirit, that filled Jesus is given to us also.

We believe that Jesus, Son of Mary, is fully a human being. But we believe more than that. Because of the divine authority that he shows in his power to teach and to forgive, as our gospels describe it, we say also that the whole of his human life is the direct effect of God's action working in him at every moment. Some of our teachers have said that his human life is like iron that has been heated in the fire until it has the same power to burn as the fire does.

We call him the Son of God. But we do not mean by this that God has physically begotten him, or that he is made to be another God alongside the one God. We say rather that the one God is first the source of everything, the life from which everything flows out. Then we say that the one God is also in that flowing-out. The life that comes from him is not something different from him. It reflects all that he is. It shows his glory and beauty and communicates them. Once again, our teachers say that God has a perfect and eternal 'image' of his glory, sometimes called his wisdom, sometimes called his 'word', sometimes called his 'son', though this is never to be understood in a physical and literal way. And we say that the one God, who is both source and outward-flowing life, who is both 'Father' and 'Son', is also active as the power that draws everything back to God, leading and guiding human beings towards the wisdom and goodness of God. This is the power we call 'Holy Spirit'.

So when we speak of 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', we do not at all mean to say that there are three gods – as if there were three divine people in heaven, like three human people in a room. Certainly we believe that the three ways in which God eternally exists and acts are distinct – but not in the way that things in the world or even persons in the world are distinct. This is why when Christians read in the Qur'an the strong condemnation of 'associating' with God other beings that are not God, they will agree wholeheartedly.

If we then return to what Christians believe about Jesus, Son of Mary, perhaps we can see why they say that he is 'Son of God'. Because the eternal word and wisdom of God has completely occupied his human mind and body, we say that in him this word and wisdom has 'become flesh', has been 'incarnated'. Because the word and wisdom of God is seen in the Jewish Scriptures of the Old Testament as like a 'child' of God – and also because these scriptures often call the kings of God's people who rule according to wisdom the 'sons of God' – we are able to say that Jesus is God's Son. And from the very first, Christian teachers have said that this language must not be thought of in any physical way.

When Jesus himself prays to God in his own human voice, he calls him 'Father'. And what we must now add to what we have said so far is that this title expresses not only the acknowledgement on the part of Jesus that his whole being comes directly from God, but also the trust and complete confidence that he enjoys with God. As the Gospel of St John tells us over and over again, Jesus knows the very mind and heart of God and can reveal it completely and authoritatively to those he calls to be with him. When the Christian prays 'in the name of Jesus' and says 'Our Father', the Christian is saying to God: 'you have promised that, when I pray, you, O God, will hear the voice of Jesus, and you will look upon me with the same love that Jesus knew.' When we pray, we stand in the place of Jesus, we speak his words, and we hope in confidence that we shall receive the love he receives.

2.

Many who are not Christian think that this means Christians rely upon Jesus instead of trying to obey God's commands for themselves. Other faiths sometimes criticise Christians for treating human beings as if they were not fully responsible for their actions. But the Christian belief is this. When God created the world, he made all things according to his will. But the first human beings refused to obey God, although they knew what he asked of them. By rebelling against him in this way, they started a process of corruption in the world which spreads to everyone who is born into it. Even before a newborn child has learned to speak, it will have been touched and affected by a 'climate' of disobedience to God. We are all deeply affected by the actions of others, and sometimes we find that the results of other people's actions make it hard or even impossible to do what is right. Christians say that this is something that to

some extent limits the freedom of every human being. The law of God is there and it is plain, but we are held in prison by this history of sin and disobedience. Such is the teaching of St Paul. This is what we mean when we speak of 'original sin' – the sin that is there even before we have done anything.

Only God the creator can restore the freedom to obey his commandments. How does he do this? When he creates Jesus in the womb of Mary, he brings into being a human life that will be perfectly obedient to his will because it is a human life completely filled with divine power. Jesus thus shows us what a human life is like when it is lived as it should be. But he does more. Because of his perfect obedience and goodness, he is able to offer himself to rejection and death, so that by his death there may be a restored relationship of love between God and humanity. Christians say that Jesus, as he goes to the cross, accepts all the suffering that is the consequence for human beings of their rebellion and weakness. He 'pays the price' of human wickedness. Because he accepts this suffering as an act of love, he changes what is possible for human beings. They need no longer despair that they can never obey or love God.

When we come in trust to Jesus and identify with him, when we stand in his place and speak with his words, the Holy Spirit gives us once again the freedom to live a life according to God's will. Once we were not free, because the only kind of human fellowship possible was fellowship in the legacy of sin that affects us all. But Jesus creates a new kind of fellowship, a relationship with himself that is going to be stronger than the deep currents pulling us towards sin and rebellion. St Paul says that this means there is a 'new creation'. We are able to start over again.

Christians have always found it hard to say exactly how this works. Some speak of Jesus taking the punishment for sin in our place; some speak of him offering himself as a sacrifice. Some speak of him winning a victory over Satan and setting all of us who are prisoners free. It seems that there is no one way of saying this correctly. But what matters is this. In the life of Jesus, the completeness of divine love breaks into a world in which human beings are not free and not in contact with that love. By approaching his death as an act of love for human beings, by speaking about it (as he does in the gospels) as a sort of payment to the powers of evil that will release

people from the effects of the sin of the first human beings, he 'opens the kingdom of heaven to all believers', to use the words of very old Christian hymn.

And because God brings him back from death to meet again with his followers, we know that his life is not a thing of the past. He is still alive, eternally alive. He calls people to be with him just as he did in his life on earth. And so day by day he creates that community of fellowship with him which gives human beings the possibility of living differently, living in obedience to God. In the words of our Scriptures, he 'breathes' into his followers the power of the Holy Spirit, so that they are drawn back to God and God's ways. Because he rose from death 'on the first day of the week', according to the gospels, Sunday has always been a special day for Christians. And the Easter season is the greatest of all Christian festivals.

When we receive the Holy Spirit, we still have to use our freedom to choose the good. But in fellowship with Jesus, we know that we have the help of the Spirit, giving us strength to resist temptation and wisdom to see where it lies. We also know that when we fail or fall back, as sometimes we are bound to do, the forgiving love of God will give us another opportunity to serve him, to try and model our lives on the life of Jesus and to let the freedom and love which he has planted in our hearts change all that we do and say. When the Qur'an speaks in Sura 40 of the angels who bear the throne of God praying for forgiveness for those who truly believe and turn in trust to God, Christians would find this easy to agree with. To ask for mercy and to rely on God's mercy do not let us off the obligation to use all our powers in God's service. They only assure us that, so long as we trust God we shall be given fresh opportunities by his grace.

3.

When we read our holy book, the Bible, containing the Scriptures of the Jewish people and also the writings of the first generation of believers in Jesus, we do so in order to hear how God's revealing power has been at work in history. God's first actions to free human beings from the effects of Adam's rebellion are to be found in his calling to Abraham to be the father of a people who will be close to God and know his purpose. Later God saves this nation from Egypt and gives them the law of Moses. The people of Israel experience a long history of both God's favour and

God's judgement; and at last God sends Jesus as his word, his gift, his action and presence in the world, so as to gather a people who will this time be not just one nation, but a community of every nation – 'every tribe, people and language', as the New Testament says.

The books contained in the Bible are of very diverse character. Unlike the Qur'an, this is not a text delivered in a brief space of time to one person. The Bible is, we believe, a book that speaks with one voice about God and his will and nature; but it does so – to use a popular Christian image – like a symphony of different voices and instruments of music, miraculously held together in one story and one message about God, a story whose climax is Jesus. Sometimes parts of the Bible are hard to understand; sometimes different passages seem to contradict each other. This is not surprising, when you remember that the books of the Bible were written over a period of more than a thousand years. But every word has been discussed and thought about for another two thousand years, and Christian teachers have found that there is always a deep unity of thought, once it is agreed that the life of Jesus is the centre of the picture and that it makes sense of all the rest.

Traditionally, the first five books of the Bible, describing the creation, the flood, the history of Abraham and his family, the rescue of the people of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the law to Moses are called the Pentateuch, the 'five books of Moses'. There are then books of historical chronicles, books of psalms and proverbs, the messages of the prophets who declared God's judgement against the people's sins and promised that God would restore them if they turned to him, and a few books about how the people of Israel came back from their exile in Babylon. In the New Testament, the four gospels ('gospel' means 'good news') tell the story of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles tells of the spread of the faith, and the letters or 'epistles' of Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude are writings that give guidance on matters of belief and behaviour to different communities. The Revelation to John is a vision of the last days of the world and the coming of Jesus in glory to judge all people.

Christians believe that the Bible is inspired by God – that is, they believe that the texts that make up the Bible were composed by the help of the Holy Spirit and that they communicate God's will perfectly when they are taken together and read in the context of prayer and worship. Some Christians believe that this means the Bible is

never wrong about any statement of fact. Others, while agreeing that the Bible is the final authority, would say that it may at times be mistaken, in the way ordinary human writers may be mistaken, about certain not very significant matters of fact, about dates, about personal names or stories, about geography, and so on. We do not think that God dictates the Bible to its writers, but that he works with and in their human minds to communicate his purpose, to tell us what we need to know in order to be set free from our mistakes and sins. Christians have spent much energy on the study of the Bible's texts and how they came to be composed. They have established the best evidence for the texts and have discovered and discussed very early examples of the manuscripts (we have a part of St John's gospel on a piece of parchment dated less than 100 years after Jesus). Sometimes the results of this study have been seen to be disturbing by those who insist upon the accuracy of every detail. But a large number of Christians accept the results of scholarly study as confirming the idea that the Bible tells one story in several different voices.

As the pattern of the whole story suggests, the New Testament, written by Jesus' first followers and friends, cannot be understood without the Old Testament. Jesus works to recreate the people of God, just as the ancient prophets of Israel did; but he extends the boundaries of the people of God to include all nations. The God who once made a 'covenant', an alliance, with the people of Israel, now makes a covenant with all who trust in God because of what Jesus says and does.

Often in Christian history, teachers and scholars have found that the words of the Bible may have a symbolic meaning beyond their surface meaning. If the Holy Spirit is involved in the writing of the Bible, this should not be surprising. But no Christian doctrine can be proved just by appealing to a symbolic meaning alone.

When the leaders of the congregation deliver sermons, their main purpose is, or should be, to help believers understand the unity and harmony of the texts that have been read at an act of worship; and then to encourage them to live lives worthy of the good news that they have received.

All Christian public worship expresses first of all our gratitude that God has given his Spirit so that we can live by the power and love of Jesus the 'Anointed King' (which is what 'Christ' means). Admission to a full share in this worship is by baptism – a word which originally meant being dipped in water. According to Christian teaching, when water is poured over someone in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, their old life comes to an end – the life of slavery to disobedience – and the new life of the Spirit begins. At first, those baptised would be adults who had accepted belief in Jesus. As the Christian community grew and spread, and families brought up their children to believe, it became more common for children to be baptised. In many churches, there is another ceremony performed by a bishop, 'confirmation', which is believed to complete the process of baptism.

Practically all Christian communities meet for the ritual meal of bread and wine called the Holy Communion and sometimes referred to as the 'Eucharist' (thanksgiving) or 'Mass' (sending out in mission). Many churches meet every day for this, most of them at least once a week. The ceremony has its origins in the action of Jesus the night before his crucifixion, when he said the blessing over the bread and wine at the table, saying that they were his 'body and blood'.

This language has often seemed strange or shocking. But its meaning must be looked for in the context of the Bible as a whole. The prophets of ancient Israel performed symbolic actions to show that God was about to do certain things. So Jesus, as he breaks the bread and shares the wine at dinner says that the bread broken and eaten shows what will happen to his body in his suffering, and the wine poured out represents his blood shed. In this suffering, though, God acts to free human beings from their slavery. The suffering Jesus endures will therefore be like food and drink for his friends – it will give life and strength. When they bless bread and wine in his name, the sharing of this food and drink will be an occasion for God's new life to enter into them afresh. Just as Jesus' human flesh and blood is the place where God's power and Spirit are at work, so in this bread and wine, blessed in his memory, the same power and Spirit are active.

But around this central idea many other images and concepts gather. The meal is a Christian version of the Passover meal of the Jews in which they remember how God led them out of slavery. It is like the meal after a sacrifice in which something has



been offered to God so as to make peace. It is like the meals Jesus shared with sinners and outcasts to show them that God was ready to welcome and forgive them. And it is like the meals that Jesus shared with his disciples after he had been raised from death. It is also the place where prayers are offered for all who need prayer. Because the Christian at Holy Communion stands especially close to Jesus, it is a time to bring our prayers into his prayer. Many Christians say that being at Holy Communion is being present in heaven while we are still on earth – because we are close to Jesus, praying with his voice, receiving his life. Many of the prayers used all over the Christian world talk about how at the Communion service we praise God alongside the angels and all the holy people of the past. When the community meets for Communion, it is part of the whole assembly of God's people, living and dead, on earth and in heaven.

The word 'church' translates a Greek word whose original meaning is 'assembly'. In the Greek world, the assembly of all the citizens in a city was an important event: citizens made decisions together, and their share in these events showed their dignity and freedom. So when people come together at the call of Jesus, they are 'citizens' of God's kingdom or God's city, and they declare their freedom to obey his laws.

Over the centuries, sadly, quarrels about details of teaching have separated Christian communities from one another, as Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox. While relations between these bodies are better now than they have sometimes been, it is hard to bring a bout complete reconciliation. Yet there is still a great unity about these chief teachings and a willingness to pray together for deeper unity.

Unity is of importance because Jesus declared at his last meal with the disciples that the love they had for each other should be a visible sign of the love between him and his heavenly Father – a love (as we saw earlier) that is something infinitely greater than any bond between two human individuals. In their behaviour, Christians are always meant to show love – not as a feeling for each other but as a habit of seeing each other as God sees human beings. So love means readiness to forgive injuries and not to be self-righteous; it means being ready to give all we have for each other's welfare or healing; it means justice – treating everyone as equally God's creature, equally entitled to respect and service. Some think that Christian love is a 'soft' and

vague thing; but if it does not include justice, it is meaningless. Once again, every Christian would agree with what we find in the Qur'an, especially in the fourth Sura, where we are told to be mindful of the Lord 'who has made us all from a single soul' and not to be miserly, 'hiding the bounty God has given'. Almsgiving, whether by individual gift or by corporate or social care, is essential to Christian life. It is sad that so many historically Christian countries are often slow to give in this way to their own poor or to the poor of the rest of the world.

Our love must also be faithful love. We must be committed to each other and to service and justice in God's world, not following the feelings of a passing moment. This applies very directly to our human relationships. For Christians, marriage is a sign of God's promise and commitment to human beings and of Jesus' love for his people. This is why Christians are on the whole very uneasy about divorce; and they also believe that sexual activity before or outside marriage is a betrayal of this idea of committed love and relationship. The principle of faithful love means also that the care of children is essential for a life of justice and goodness according to God's will. Quarrels between husband and wife, unfaithfulness, neglect or cruelty all have an effect on children and are therefore doubly bad.

Although Christians put such a high value on forgiveness, they do not therefore reject the idea of just punishment applied by a lawful authority, including a non-Christian authority that acts with fairness and wisdom. In the history of the Church there have been different attitudes to whether it is right to go to war. Most have said that it can be justified on certain carefully defined conditions – if you are defending your people, if there is no possible alternative way of settling a dispute, if you can guarantee that innocent people will not be harmed or killed. But even on such conditions, there is a good deal of reservation in Christian tradition. Jesus in the gospels opposes violence, even in self-defence, for any individual. But St Paul seems to allow that force can be used by rulers to restrain evildoers. There is always a sense that force is second-best for the Christian, though it may be necessary in a threatening or unjust situation. Most Christians would now say that the history of the Crusades, for example, or the religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were serious betrayals of many of the central beliefs of Christian faith. Any modern attempt to revive a crusading ideal is not likely to be supported by most Christian believers.

5.

Lastly, it may be helpful to say a word about other kinds of Christian prayer. We have seen something of the meaning of what is said in public services. But Christians pray in private also. And in addition to praying for those in need and praying for forgiveness for their sins and giving thanks for blessings received, many Christians, since at least the third Christian century, have practised silent contemplation. They have disciplined their minds and bodies to be still so that the life of God may come into them more freely. The tradition of monastic life has formed the background of much of this life of silence and adoration. Some are called, Christians believe, to live a life without marriage and property, under obedience to a common rule of life, so that in this austere and sacrificial environment they may more readily come into what many have called the 'repose' of silent prayer. Some too have written about how the journey into this silence may be a road of great suffering, a following of the suffering of Jesus. Christian mysticism often speaks of the 'darkness' in which God lives – not because he does not want to communicate but because our minds and hearts are too small for him to enter fully, so that we experience God as challenging and overwhelming. But it also speaks of light flooding the mind, like the light that flowed from the face of Jesus, according to the gospels, when he was praying in the presence of his friends.

This may be an appropriate place to end. What the Christian hopes and prays for is that at the end he or she will be brought by the grace of God's Spirit to see the glory of God as it is shown in the face of Jesus, and to be so united with his prayer to the Father that we never fall away. All that the observer might see in a Christian meeting for worship is directed towards this. We seek to let the life that was alive in Jesus Son of Mary be alive in each one of us through the gift of God's Spirit. And we pray that this life will, through us, bring healing and peace to all the world. There are many beliefs that divide Christians from others, not least from their Muslim friends and neighbours, and this lecture will have made some of them clearly visible. But I hope we may listen patiently to each other, discovering something of God in our meeting; and that we may pray each in our own way for the same peace and healing in a world that seems today so full of injustice and fear and conflict.