



Thinking Things Through

Who is Jesus?

The English Premiership soccer club Manchester City, like its football rivals, expends considerable time and other resources scouring the world for promising young football talent which it can then bring to Manchester and develop into top flight footballers. Sometime the youngsters don't make the grade and have to go home or content themselves with playing at a lower level club. Sometimes it takes a while for them to acclimatise themselves to the English game but they make it in the end. But sometimes it all just works perfectly. They arrive, just hit the ground running and find success early.

The latter is what has happened to a young lad who has arrived recently from Brazil and as I write this in early February he has got his place in the first team already and is scoring goals like there's no tomorrow. The City fans are of course very happy and have taken him to their hearts as have the newspaper sports page subeditors who enjoy nothing more than a pun. Because, what's also unusual about this lad is that his name is Gabriel Jesus. So, as he has knocked in the goals, the tabloid newspapers have had a field day in working his surname into all sorts of attention-grabbing and punning headlines, which I'm sure readers can guess at.

And while this can all be fairly amusing it occurred to me that if I was in the company of a football fan, who had little knowledge of things Christian and a shortish attention span and he asked me socially "Who was this Jesus and what was he all about anyway?" would I be able to give a succinct response? I'd give it a go.

After what happened in the Garden of Eden, mankind was separated from God and lost in sin. He was banished from the Garden and both he and the earth were now in a fallen state and that's why things are far from perfect and why we and our ancestors have had sickness, pain, sorrow and death. Certainly a bad state of affairs and one that needed fixing. And because he loved man, God decided that he would take steps to fix it.

Salvation was what was needed to put things right. That salvation was planned in heaven but could not be accomplished in heaven. Long story short, somebody had to pay God for man's sin. So what God did was that he had his son take the form of a man called Jesus and He would come and die, like a sacrificial lamb to buy our salvation.

The Bible tells us about this time and again. For example, the apostle Paul tells us "Christ Jesus who being in very nature God...made himself nothing, taking the very

nature of a servant... and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross" (Philippians 2: 5-8). Somebody had to take the rap for all the sins that men have committed down the years, beginning with Adam. All the wars and murders and lies and rapes and all the trying to live against the laws that God has given us down the centuries. It was all bundled up into one big debt and Jesus paid for it with his life. Again, Paul puts it thus "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

And not only that. Following the crucifixion and after he'd been dead and buried for three days, he was raised from the dead and then went out to show himself and speak to his friends and followers in order to prove it. Paul recounts what happened: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve. After that he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep." (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

So, not only has he paid the bill for our sins but he has also provided a bridge of sorts by which we can cross the vast gulf which has existed between mankind and God since the fall. He and he alone provides salvation and the prospect of the eternal life which will follow it. As John tells us "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) That's pretty straightforward.

But just in case anybody thinks that to gain this salvation, all we then are expected to do is live like mother Theresa well that is just plain wrong. It's not like that. The Centurion Cornelius was a good, God-fearing man. As good as any. But he found that his good works were not enough. From Peter he hears the "message through which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:14).

We must receive Christ ourselves; everyone, individually. It's not enough to be part of a religious family or attend a church or sing the hymns with gusto. We have to receive and believe in Jesus Christ. As John said "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." (John 1:12)

And we need to realise that an awareness of and conviction of our sin, and such belief, is a gift from God. As Paul explains " For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Jesus' death was a voluntary sacrifice of love. He was not forced onto the cross by the Jews or the Romans against his will. This act by Jesus the Son was in perfect agreement with the will of God the Father. He not only had the power to lay down his life but also to take it up again, through the resurrection. And Jesus Christ himself now invites us to be saved, even in this day and age. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." (Rev 3:20)

Living in Christ involves not living the way that most people do, with their own personal wants and desires at the forefront of their minds. In the Old Testament, Isaiah said that all people are like sheep and have gone astray from God. His meaning was that in our natural state we are easily led and influenced and it's fair to say that most people still live in the way that Isaiah describes. But by living in Christ, we put him in the driving seat and all that we do should conform to what he wants for us. As he told us himself "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

I'm not sure if this missive would be what's needed by the average football fan when discussing Jesus Christ but it's perhaps at least worth our while having thought through how we might get our message across to these and other various different people. Everyone in the media from political spin doctors to sports subeditors know how to get a message across in a short punchy way (before people's eyes begin to glaze over) and I suppose that Christians need to do the same thing.

As the apostle Peter tells us, we should be "ready always" to give "a reason for the hope that is in you." (1 Pet. 3:15)

As we started on a football theme we'll finish on one. However, referring to events in Scotland this time rather than in Manchester and with more than a nod to Mary Poppins. Arguably, the best ever footballing headline was the one below which followed when Inverness Caledonian Thistle had unexpectedly beaten Glasgow Celtic in 2000:

"Super Caley Go Ballistic, Celtic Are Atrocious."

Where else would you get it?