

Simple Worship - A Man called Jesus

Introduction;

I can't believe it's been over a year since I last lead Simple worship

The main reason *[I guess]* is that
2014 was fairly **"full-on"** in other places
which was good although I've got to say;

*"if I did nothing else than to preach here [every month]
I would end my ministry a happy man"*

The good news for you *[of course is];*

.... that's not how things work
and so you've been spared that agony ...

The point I'm heading towards *[in mentioning this **"full-on"** stuff];*

is not to find sympathy *[because that would be a total waste of breath]*

but it's to remind ourselves that most of us are *[in all sorts of ways]* **"busy people"**
and so often that **"busyness"** gets in the way of more important matters

and those in Christian Ministry are *by nature [it seems]* **"very busy people"**
[and that I suggest - includes everyone here tonight];

The problems with all this **"busyness"** is *[that];*
that whilst *[short-term]* it makes *"time-fly"*
in the long run;

.... most of us find it's unsustainable – *[it dulls minds]*

... so often it leads us down the road to nowhere -

There comes a time when **"busyness"** *[in all its many shades and complexions];*

.... needs an antidote – a fix - some form of correction

And all the experts will tell you – the common-sense thing to do is to hold back;

just;

".... take-a-"break-mate" - "chill friend"

[easier said-than-done - I suggest]

Thankfully *[though]* that opportunity was given to me on the run-up to Christmas and;

and the point of me mentioning this tonight is to give you an insight
of what's on my mind at the moment ...

[and forgive me if I take you round the houses]

A Man called Jesus

The sermon tonight *[then]* begins with a simple statement of fact,
and this is the fact:

*The Christian religion begins – continues – and ends in a **Man called Jesus.***

To my way of thinking it is an undeniable fact:

it is also a fact that is often forgotten.

Therefore, in the first part of this sermon I shall ponder the fact itself –
first by looking at the church at the very beginning of its life –

then twelve hundred years later to around the
time when this church seems to have taken root –

before finally moving *[on again]* to the here-and-now

Pause

It all began when a small group of young men were drawn to a man about their own age about whom they
knew virtually nothing.

He asked them to follow him

He didn't ask them to **believe IN him** or even to **believe him** or to **worship him**;

He asked them simply to follow him –

.... to join him –
.... to watch him the way an apprentice watches a master-craftsman –
.... to listen to him –
.... to share his life

.... and d’you know what happened?

.... *they did!!*

If you’d asked them why *[they did]*
they couldn’t possibly have told you;

.... they had absolutely no theories about him at that time
.... they didn’t exactly know who he was - except that he was son of a carpenter
.... and that he came from Nazareth

They didn’t know what he was going to do.

He promised them little or nothing bar - “*the pleasure of his company*” *[to coin a phrase]*

and to share in his mission - and life by way of suffering.

They didn’t always **understand** him

In fact they **often misunderstood** him

They loved his stories – because they were good stories
but they also misunderstood the point of his stories
*[as many people do now
when they listen to a sermon and hear an illustration which intrigues them
and yet*

.... they manage to completely miss the point of what the illustration was meant to illustrate. *[believe me - I know]*

They were impressed by the wonderful things that he did;

.... by the extraordinary way he could make the sick people well;
.... by the way he could make a little go a long – long way
.... and the way he could change a man’s attitude and outlook on life

They often disappointed him;
.... sometimes they let him down
.... and at the utterly crucial moment - they left him utterly alone

But they came back;
.... his death shook them
.... and his resurrection renewed them

They came back changed
.... sobered
.... and above everything else – cheered

They lived in a new world;

.... the old one was still there with all its problems and questions and insoluble difficulties
.... the Roman troops were still marching through the cities
.... the taxes were unbearable
.... and evil was still rampant in every city – town – and village

The old world was still there;

.... but they went on their way rejoicing
.... they didn't try to destroy the old world
.... they just ignored it

They could go on their way rejoicing
because **IN** a **Man called Jesus**
they found **God**;

.... the mystery of life
.... the ground of their being
.... and what's more ...

.... in them He found a **habitation** for **His Spirit**

They never equalled him
.... they never really successfully explained him
[although they tried to in generations to come]
[and here we are today - still trying]

.... but they were never able to put into words exactly what he meant to them

Then again - they'd found a way of treating each other
and above all else
they found a way of meeting life in all its intolerant and cruel ways;
that they'd never come across before

And that way - they caught from him
and this eventually caught the attention of the civilised world

That's the way it began:

When a small group of people were drawn to a **Man called Jesus**
and they took him seriously
and that's why we are in this place *[right here and now]*

It's as profound – as deep – as philosophical – as theological and as SIMPLE as that!!

Shift:

Now skip twelve hundred years and see how it continued

By then the small group had now grown into an enormous institution

Overall the church had acquired property – power – and prestige beyond imagination;
its leaders *[especially the prince-bishops] [and above all the Pope]*
held absolute political – civic - and spiritual authority both here and abroad

To be sure

The church's institution inspired artists and made it possible for them to work;

.... it encouraged educators

.... and was largely responsible for keeping alive the learnings of the past *[when all might have been lost];*

.... and it inspired architects to send up magnificent buildings that seemed to touch the skies

.... and at a completely different level

it made possible places *[like this humble place of prayer and worship]*
could be allowed to fledge and prosper in these wilds of nowhere *[and indeed in every other parish in the land]*

But what happened to the Man called Jesus in all of this?

He was there;
.... he was glorified
.... theologised
.... painted
.... pictured
..... worshiped
... *[but I'm sorry to say]* – **not** always followed

He was too far away
.... too remote
.... too much apart from the life of the people who belonged to the church

Shift;

Perhaps that shouldn't surprise us too much;

simply look towards many a great institution
and so often find that what had started with a clearly defined *[and shared]* sense of purpose
has over time morphed into something completely different
where all the founding *[original]* ideals might be there
but only in part *[.... so often in part]*

.... roots misplaced
.... reasons – *[origins]* - *[directions]* confused and forgotten

That's precisely what had happened to the institutionalised church by the twelfth century
somewhere amid the power – prestige and wealth
it had grown top-heavy and complex

and this **Man Jesus Christ** was almost lost somewhere in the muddle

Move;

Then amid all - this something unexpected happened

A young man *[who was neither a Jew - nor prince-bishop]*
appeared on the scene

He was *[in fact]* an Italian;
[the eldest son of a prosperous silk merchant]

His name was **Giovanni Francesco Bernadone** *[we know him simply as Francis]*

Francis lived the typical life of a wealthy young man to the full

His life *[though]* was to take on a completely new direction

Somehow he found himself on a pilgrimage to Rome,
where he joined the poor in begging at St. Peter's Basilica

That experience moved him to live in poverty

Nine hundred years ago this month
Francis attended mass at a chapel *[not unlike this place]*

The Gospel for that day was from the tenth chapter of St Matthew and this is part of it;

"... Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

And as ye go preach saying

The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand

Heal the Sick

cleanse the lepers

raise the dead

cast out devils

freely ye have received

freely give

Provide neither gold or silver nor brass in your purses

Nor scrip for your journey

neither two coats

neither shoes

nor yet staves

for the workman is worthy of his meat"

It happens that Francis and his family were already estranged
he lived on what people would give him in return for what work he could do
but at that moment something happened

His biographer says that Francis' mind took a swift plunge into the literal

Right there before the little altar – he threw in his lot
and that included setting aside his stick and his bag
his purse and every cent of money that he had

before going out to do something he'd never done before;

.... to preach!!

Reassuringly *[for a person like me]*

He wasn't a learned man
he had little in formal education
but he went *[if you can believe it]*
back to his home town of Assisi

There were no pulpits in the churches because in those days
formal preaching wasn't part of church culture
so he stood outside
jeered by the crowd because he looked like a madman – a beggar *[I feel even more assured]*

Every biographer has pointed out he was not handsome
nor robust;
he was slight

But there was a grace in his movements *[not sure about that one]*
and something unforgettable about his voice

It was his voice that first made the people listen

He stood there in the street and talked to people about the love of God

What he said had none of the sermon artistry

He simply talked out of what had happened to himself *[without ever mentioning self]*

Then just as he finished and started to go away
three men asked if they could join him;

two of them had very little
and one was a well-to-do man

They went with him

Later – more and more sought him until thousands began to look for him
and ask;

“....what they must do to join his group”

He required no qualifications or training program;

.... just two things

First he asked them to give away everything they owned

Do you know what the other one was?

He required them to be cheerful
that they could mourn their sins in private
but as they went about their way
they must sing!!

He never attacked the institution

He went on his own way within it
but somehow a breath of fresh air swept across the western world
and if we try to say what was it that made the difference
it was his cheerfulness

.... it was the sheer vivacity – the exuberance – and energy of Frances *[and his followers]*
that spread like wildfire

The world was no longer *[quote]* “a vale of tears”;
it was;

*“a wondrous world
and neither vice nor iniquity was strong enough to destroy its loveliness”*

he didn’t change the institution
not its structure
but he changed the lives of people in a way that is hard to describe.

So much for the statement that;

the Christian Faith begins – continues – and ends in the **Man called Jesus**

Now a question – and it’s not an easy question to ask:

Today we live in troubled times;

.... where overnight the phrase “*Je Suis Charlie*” has come to personify meanings never before imagined

.... where children and the elderly and vulnerable seem to be exploited in so many different way

.... where hour-by-hour people around the world die in their thousands through starvation

[and my question is this][repeat];

Is it conceivable to you

that anything Francis did could possibly happen today in a world like ours?

Is it possible that a small group of people – *[people like us]*

can take Jesus seriously

and by doing so change the world -

in some unimaginable way for good

At first you say it's unthinkable;

.... the world is entirely different now

.... we don't think in the same way people did in Francis' day

.... and the world's problems are so colossal that to believe a group of people *[like us]* could
have influence beyond these four walls would be;

Impossible – Bonkers [.... we might think]

Pause

Actually I want to suggest we might like to think otherwise;

that when it comes to this ***Man called Jesus***

we should ***never-say-never***

Move;

I now speak for myself simply because I can't speak for anyone else

[though I'm reasonably sure this will include some of you]

In speaking for myself I could not take Jesus literally the way St Francis did

for instance;

- I couldn't ***“cut off my right hand or pluck out my right eye”*** even though
in Matthews gospel Jesus says;

*"If thin eye offends thee – pluck it out
and if thy right hand offends the – cut it off" -. I couldn't do that*

- I couldn't **"hate my mother and father"**
even though in one place in the gospel Jesus is said to have told us to do it – *I couldn't do it*
- I couldn't **"give everything away – everything I have – [everything I've worked for]"**
and rely on hand-outs from the food banks *[and benefit payments]*
- I couldn't believe that **"I could get everything I prayed for"** –
even though in one place Jesus said;

"Ask and ye shall receive"

But there are other things I know I can do

You may think they are unimportant *[compared to the troubles [and wrongs] [and the needs] of this world]*

or *[indeed]* the state the church *[and society]* finds itself in *[these days]*

but they are things I know I can do

I am going to mention only three of them:

To be like **this Man called Jesus can be as complicated or as simple as we chose**

[So One] I can Simplify

The biggest challenge faced by truly committed Christians *[to my mind]*
is to work out precisely what it is that God wants of us;

.... to get our heads around what God actually wants from us as individuals
[and by extension]

.... what he wants us of us *[as his church family]* here at Hebron and Mitford

.... *[it's a question that repeatedly crops up in our household]*

Shift;

None of here tonight needs reminding that;

"All things come from God – and of his own do we give Him

.... or that *[at least]* is supposed to be the theory!

[and] None of us needs reminding that

He has blessed us in so many different and remarkable ways

And I'm not necessarily talking about;

possessions - money in the bank -

or flash cars parked outside

or the latest iPad air; -

I'm thinking more along the lines of blessings *[from God]* in the form of;

.... the gift of intellect –

.... how we use our minds –

.... the gift of music –

.... what we can do with our hands -

.... the gift of generosity, -

.... friendship and understanding and compassion for one another.

And although we might have the impression all these gifts are ***"for free"***

[to help us to live a wonderful – comfortable life with no strings attached]

[again] none of us need reminding – *[that deep down within]* we know that to be simply untrue

So often scripture reminds us *[encourages us] [cajoles us]*

to live a good and Godly life and use these wonderful and precious gifts to help others

and perhaps in the doing –

let others see Christ working in our lives.

Lots of us can turn our hands to many things

My own life is filled *[or should that be flawed]* with a bit of this and a bit of that.

Jack of all trades that's me –
and all that means is
that for years and years I have done lots of things –
created lots of dust and made lot of noise but –

[but] do I ever manage to get anything done properly – *[do I achieve anything worthwhile]?*

might this be the **busyness** thing I mentioned earlier

Shift;

A good friend of mine has told me on more than one occasion;

"... that just because you can – doesn't mean you have to"

and that inevitably lead me to the question;

"where on earth do I draw the line"

"why is all this so complicated"?

and then *[I say to myself]–*

"am I am the only one"?

D'you know that for as long as I can remember

we [I mean this church family]

have been trying like mad to see what it takes to be a vibrant and Christ-like church

[we were at it again at last Thursday's PCC]

and we end up trying this and trying that – *[it's that "busyness" thing again]*

and to be absolutely honest

I'm not too sure if we have made a great deal of progress in that direction

Yes there have been some stunning initiatives;

.... this church *[Hebron]* drawing nearer to **the school & community** for example

.... all the **children and youth work** that's gone on over the years at Mitford

.... our enduring **Mission Partnerships**

.... our **Pastoral Care**

.... the more recent work of some members in establishing the **Wansbeck Valley Food Bank**

But then there are other times when we seem to lose it *[or bottle it]*

.... we kowtow to the establishment
.... we jump from this idea to the next
.... we confuse ourselves
.... apathy takes its toll

.... and we too are in danger *[grave danger]*
of becoming estranged **from this Man called Jesus**

[and] None of us wants that to happen!!

And so I say this *[and I think it applies equally to us as individuals and us as a church family]*

- give up trying to be everywhere at one time
- stop trying to be all things to all people
- leave something for others *[and some things to God]*
- **simplify** not in order to have more leisure but more intensity *[more focus]*
- be focused rather than frenetic
- do a few things and - do those things well
- **glorify – magnify** the *Good News* - especially in our attitudes and ways of working
- and enjoy what we do and relax about what is not being done

and so I say;

Simplify – Glorify - Magnify – Exemplify

Shift;

And that leads me neatly to my second thought;

Exemplify;

*“.... what good is it, my brothers and sisters,
if people claim to have faith but have no deeds?
Can such faith save them?
Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food.
If one of you says to them,*

*“Go in peace; keep warm and well fed
but does nothing about their physical needs,*

what good is it?

*In the same way,
faith by itself,
if it is not accompanied by action,
is dead" [James 2:14]*

and from Matthew *[the one-liner that makes me both shudder and smile at the same time];*

*".... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" [Matthew 5: 16]*

I often wonder when I recite those words at BCP Communion *[as I did at 8.30]*
whether they are taken simply as no more than an encouragement
to empty people's pockets into the collection plate

Believe me Matthew is saying a whole lot more than that;

Matthew *[and James] [and a whole lot of others besides in scripture]*
are laying it on the line
they're saying every action is grounded in a belief.

In essence, we live from the inside out.
.... our actions are the public expression of what I/We really believe and value *[within]*

***It's so easy to speak the words,
declare our faith,
and worship with our voices on a Sunday morning,
but **this Man Jesus** calls us to more than that!!***

And remember what Paul said to his friends the Philippians;

*What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of
peace will be with you. [Philippians 4:9]*

in another word;

.... by whatever means
.... in whichever place *[or situation]* we find ourselves

.... Exemplify!!

.... Let your lives - Exemplify this Man called Jesus !!!....

Shift;

So I've said something about what's on my heart about - this need to **Simplify**

.... and I've talked [*a bit*] about our *duty* to **Exemplify**

But there's just one more point [*I think needs to be said tonight*]

.... and it's something both Francis and Paul alluded too

Remember I mentioned [*towards the end of my bit about Francis*]
his insistence;

.... they be cheerful
.... that they could mourn their sins in private
.... but as they went about their way
.... **they must sing!!**

And then when you get into the Acts of the Apostles
and see the beginning of that small Christian fellowship in Jerusalem
it's a story pulsating with a kind of enthusiasm and exuberance;

".... and a perpetual gladness surrounds that group from beginning to end"

When you turn to Paul
[*in spite of the hardships of his life*]
[*in spite of the fact that he spent a good deal of his time in prison*]
the word that recurs more often than almost any word in the letters of Paul
is the word **rejoice!!**

And then if we need any more persuasion

[*then*] simply look to this **Man called Jesus**

.... look and **find joy** in the way he could put into words the most profound truths of life

.... look and **find joy** in the exquisite form in which he expresses the truth
Listen to it; - "*Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God*"

.... **Enjoy** what Jesus did and the way he did it; - "*Be still – why are you afraid*"

.... **Enjoy** the magnificent gestures of faith

.... **Enjoy** the way he treated people who made mistakes
[always with infinite discernment as to the inside of a person's life]

it goes on and on

.... **Enjoy** the way he dealt with sinners

.... **Enjoy** the compassion with which in dealt with the magnitude

.... **Enjoy** that quiet – yet absolute decisiveness in the way he faced the ultimate issue of his life
[and went straight towards Jerusalem]

.... **Enjoy** the way he died so free – so fine - without any quibbling – peevishness or pettiness
in a kind of superb offering of his life for the life of humanity

Enjoy all of this and **then indulge yet more ...**

[indulge] in that ultimate - most superb enjoyment known to all mankind

Pause

.... and that is the joy of participating in his life and work
.... the joy of going out into the all the world to serve mankind in his name

.... this Man Called Jesus

Conclusion;

And if you and I did some these thing
would the world be any different –

.... I really don't know

To be quiet honest – I don't know

All I know is that;

The Christian religion [our Faith] [our being]

begins – continues – and ends in a Man called Jesus FACT

and when a man [or woman] takes **This Man Jesus** seriously

the world around him is *[by far]* a **brighter place** – the *burden is lighter* -
the **vision richer** and
the future *[strangely enough]* a **whole lot clearer !!**

I suggest all things are possible in this **Man called Jesus**

[and so humbly I beseech unto thee]

Simplify – Glorify – Exemplify – Magnify –

.... and Enjoy

In the name of this Man called Jesus

Amen