**Sermon: Why I am a Christian**

**Epistle:** Romans 1: 18-23

**Gospel reading:** John 1: 9-14

Good morning. Today, we begin a sermon series on the theme of “Why I am a Christian”. Over the next seven weeks, seven different preachers will each outline some of the reasons as to why they identify as a Christian. This might seem like a straightforward exercise, but I’ve found it to be more difficult than you might imagine. I often say that no one has a completed faith and putting your finger on just what it is that sustains, encourages and helps you to keep trusting and believing is not easy.

A good starting point, though, is to perhaps take a minute to ask, “what is a Christian”? Well, in terms of the etymology (or origin of the word), it comes from the Greek word “Christianos”, which is in itself a translation of the Hebrew word for “Messiah”, meaning “anointed one”. So, a Christian is a follower of the “anointed one” – the one who has been appointed by God and marked out for His purposes.

This “one”, of course, is identified as Jesus, a first century Galilean who taught forgiveness, repentance of sins and love for all to a relatively small band of Jews. He was crucified by the Romans at the request of Jewish leaders and then, according to his followers, rose from the dead. His life, death and resurrection have since inspired billions of people to identify as “Christians”, though, it is perhaps worth pointing out that neither Jesus nor his early followers identified themselves as “Christians”. The title was given by those outside the faith to the disciples who claimed to be followers of “the way”.

It is, perhaps, regretful that what started out as a relatively simple commitment to follow Jesus has been complicated by many centuries of theologising, philosophising and politicising. To be a Christian today can mean all sorts of different things to the two and a half billion members of around thirty thousand Christian denominations. Yet, all, in some way, still recognise Jesus as of God.

So, what does all this mean to me? Why do I choose to follow a 2000-year-old faith that often stands at odds with popular ways of viewing life, meaning and purpose? Why do I stick with something that can be the object of ridicule and, still in places around the world, can lead to active persecution and even death?

Now, it’s at this point that you might expect the preacher to proclaim, “it’s because Jesus died for my sins” or “it’s because all other ways lead to death” or “to Hell”. And there may be some elements of such claims in my beliefs, but alone they are not enough. Jesus may well have died for my sins, but as a statement, this is unverifiable – how can the death of a man 2000 years ago somehow impact on my wrongdoing? And despite the many theories of atonement that exist to explain this, it is not self-evident. And theories of what happens in the life to come, the reality of Heaven and Hell and what such beliefs say about God’s justice are also not self-evident.

There are plenty of other theological claims that I could state as reasons to be a Christian, but none of these are beyond dispute either and that is why there are thousands of books dedicated to their themes…and that is why Christianity is a faith and not a formula!

So why am I a Christian? Well, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is not a single reason, and I suspect that this will be the case for many of you. I haven’t had a Damascus Road experience - no blinding lights, distinct voices or apparitions - but I have had plenty of encounters that leave me in little doubt that God is more real than anything else in my life and that Jesus is the clearest manifestation of God and the most reliable guide to wholeness and joyful living, that I will ever find.

I was brought up in a home where church was a regular part of family life, but where questions were encouraged. And I loved asking questions(!), both of my parents and of the clergy. I wanted to understand how to make sense of this life and whether the addition of God and Biblical claims added clarity or simply clouded the issue.

I was eventually able to study and teach philosophy and being given the permission to question everything offered a welcome opportunity to formally address those issues that had been nagging away at me – what is a good life? Where does “goodness” come from? Is there such a thing as “goodness”? What happens after death? Can there really be nothingness? What must God be to be “God”? Does God judge me? How can He do this fairly when everyone’s lives are so different? Can everyone know God? Why did such a God need to create me? And can I really ever have a relationship with such a being?

There were many other questions…and there still are. But I managed to find answers that worked on some level and that was enough to keep me going forward, to keep me searching. I concluded that the idea of God was a part of me and that if I didn’t fight it, I could see it all around me – in the beauty of the earth, in the wonder of the universe, in those wholly transcendent moments of love encountered in human relationships, in the wisdom of elders who have come to realise what really matters in life, in the sacrifice of those who knew of something greater than self-preservation. As St Paul observed in the first of this morning’s readings “*the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is!”*

As my head let go of possible or imagined obstacles to what I felt was real, my heart was then able to truly engage with the notion that God invites me to have a relationship with Him in this life. The scriptures are almost exclusively the story of God’s relationship with His creation and the more I read my Bible, the more the figure of Jesus became a source of inspiration and a direction for prayer.

My everyday life is now one of constant conversation with God – laying before Him my concerns, my limitations, my hopes, my trust. Some days are more faithful than others and some days are pretty bleak, but the sense of relationship with God as loving Father, faithful Son and ever-attentive Spirit is always there.

In today’s Gospel reading we hear of Jesus as one with the Father, together for all time and yet, also alongside us in a real human relationship in a particular time and space. This is one of the most striking claims of the Christian faith, as is the invitation to respond to Jesus, to trust in His ways of love and join in with His mission as children of God. As verse 12 tells us, *“…to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...”*

Why am I a Christian? Well, I might as well be asked “why am I a human being?” For me, it is simply a fact of life, something necessary, something immovable. I am a child of God – we are all children of God. There is nothing more that we can add to life – our identity in God is everything. When I recognise this and allow God to lead me, I become all that I can be – a creation of love, made from love and designed to love. And nowhere do I see this more fully expressed than in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Amen