



FOCUS ON FAITH

Stephen G. Derges, Pastor of Bridgnorth Baptist Church



DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Whilst Christmas tends to be the most popular festival of Christianity – after all who doesn't want to celebrate by giving and receiving presents – Easter is the pinnacle of the Christian faith. And it's the event that encapsulates the primary distinctive of belief for those who have adopted faith in Jesus Christ.

Christianity has a number of key elements which some people see as being elitist and discriminatory, others might even say bigoted, and sadly often those of us who say we believe in the teachings of Christ fail to get our message across.

For example as a Christian I believe that:

- Humans are made in God's image – that we were created to be like God in spiritual attributes. The first chapter of the first book in the Bible records that God made us in His likeness and that God declared His handiwork was "very good".

... the Christian faith calls for radical belief and personal commitment

- Jesus literally had a virgin birth and a faultless, blameless life that enables us to be reconciled to a righteous God. That it was God who took the initiative to restore the relationship between Him and mankind. The whole tenet of Christianity is that we're never going to be good enough to win God's approval through the things we do or the acts of penitence we perform – only by believing in Jesus do we become acceptable to God.
- Christians don't have to struggle through life alone – that the Holy Spirit living within us helps us put into practice what we believe and we don't make life work on our abilities or our own terms.
- The power of forgiveness is essential. Christians believe that we should love and pray for our enemies rather than take revenge and retaliate. We may not always demonstrate this, and throughout history there have been times when people who purport to be followers of Christ have misinterpreted and seriously failed in this area, but a guiding principle of Christianity is that, if we've been forgiven by God, we should forgive and be reconciled with other people. As the Bible says, ***"mercy triumphs over judgment"***.

But there is one extremely important fundamental principle that distinguishes Christianity and it's the very essence of Easter.

Christians believe that we have a living, risen Saviour. There's no historical doubt about the death by crucifixion of Jesus. Secular and religious authorities confirm it happened. What has been called into question is whether, as Christians claim, Jesus came back to life again from the dead after 3 days.

However there is plenty of corroboration that it happened. Sceptical commentators would say that it's anecdotal and biased evidence, but the Bible records that Jesus was seen not just by the remaining disciples and close followers but by over 500 people at one time shortly after the resurrection.

But what convinces me is the change that occurred to those timid, terrified, fledgling believers. Remember Peter denied Jesus three times and the Bible says all the other disciples ran away. Yet a few days later, still grieving and holed up in a safe house because of fear, they meet Jesus. A few weeks on and they're transformed into vibrant evangelists who were prepared to suffer persecution, religious and political discrimination and ultimately for many, martyrdom for the cause of their faith in someone they saw die and who they now believed was alive again. Was this a fairy tale; a pipe dream; an illusion or a conviction borne out of a reality of experience and a personal relationship?

The Christian faith calls for radical belief and personal commitment in someone who called Himself the Son of God; who claimed that only through Him could we enjoy eternal life and who sacrificially died but then came back to life again to prove His authenticity.

For many, the Christian faith is unbelievable yet for millions of us around the world it's our credible experience in a God who loves – to the point of death and then beyond.

Christianity is definitely different – and the challenge of Easter is that it dares you and me to be different too!

The question is, are we up for it?

To find out more about the Christian faith and resources available plus information on services at local Churches together with contact details, please log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk.