

MATTHEW 21:33-46
THE HEART OF IT ALL!

How many Christians do you think there were in AD100? How many Christians do you think there were just before Constantine came on scene, say, AD310? In 200 years, what do you think had happened to the Christian Church? Now before answer that question, here are some things to bear in mind:

- Christianity was an illegal religion throughout all of these 200 years; at best it was tolerated by the Roman authorities, at worst persecuted.
- There were no Church buildings as we know them; any chapels were small converted houses; the Christians often met in secret.
- There were no Scriptures as we know the Bible; this was the time when the Bible was just being put together, the Church deciding what to include and what to leave out.
- There was no professional leadership, or any institution of Church structures.
- They actually made it hard for people to join the church; aspiring converts had to go through a significant period of initiation before they could prove that they were worthy to join the Church.

Here's the answer to the question: in AD100 there were as few as 25,000 Christians; in AD310 there were anything up to 25 million Christians. 25,000 to 25 million in 200 years. How did they do that?

Here's another example, one that has been described as "the most significant transformational Christian movement in the history of the Church." (Alan Hirsch) We are talking about the underground Church in China. At the time Mao took over China, there were estimates of about 2 million Christian adherents of the underground Church. Mao's aim in the Cultural Revolution was to obliterate the Church (& all religion). When the Bamboo Curtain was lifted in the early 1980's and missionaries were allowed back in, what did they find? A dead, obliterated Church? 20 years ago, they found a Church that had 60 million adherents and in 2004 the estimate was of 80 million adherents to the underground Church in China. How do they do that?

These questions are raised by a book called *The Forgotten Ways* by a man called Alan Hirsch. In beginning to answer the question 'how did they do that?' he went to *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy meets three people on the yellow brick road: she meets the Scarecrow who is looking for a brain; the Tinman is looking for a heart and the cowardly lion is looking for courage. They all go to the Wizard looking for these gifts and qualities and have all kinds of adventures along the road. In fact, through these adventures they discover that the Scarecrow is already clever; the tinman already has a real heart and the lion turned out to be brave and courageous after all. "What they needed was a situation that forced them to discover (or to activate) that which was already in them." (Hirsch)

Alan Hirsch goes on to describe what he calls Apostolic Genius, the energy and wisdom that the apostles had in the early church. He believes that this Apostolic Genius "lies dormant in you, me and every local Church that seeks to follow Jesus faithfully in any time. We have simply forgotten how to access and trigger it." The centre of that Apostolic Genius is the simple confession that Jesus is Lord – the heart of it all is the rediscovery that Jesus is Lord. The Early Church and the Chinese Church both had this very clear focus, on the real heart of Church and Christian life, that Jesus is Lord; everything else came from that and was centred round that; the message they preached was that Jesus is Lord; the life they lived was about living out that faith and making Jesus Lord of their lives in every aspect.

We spoke last week about God being on a mission in the world; His mission is to bless the world and we looked at one example from Exodus 6 where God was set on blessing Israel in the days of Moses; we saw then that Israel's freedom was down to something God did. All that was left for Israel was to know the Lord. God's mission is to bless the world, so that people across the world come to know Him; it really is as simple as that. At the heart of that mission stands the figure of Jesus Christ; Jesus is the centre of all things as far as God is concerned. As the Church taking part in God's mission there are two great marker posts for us to pass on: 'Love God; love other people' – it's as simple as that. At heart of all of that is Jesus Christ.

Jesus told a parable that is all about Himself. In the story, a rich landowner has planted a vineyard and then rented it out to some tenants. They work the vineyard and then came the time of year when the crops has been gathered and the rent is due; so the landowner sends a servant to collect the rent. The tenants decide not to pay and so they beat up some of the servants who are sent and others they actually kill; the landowner sent lots of servants but each one is mistreated. Then "*Last of all...*" (v.37) and so his son is sent to collect the rent. But the tenants see an opportunity to take the whole inheritance for themselves so they kill the son.

The story is all about God's mission to the world. He has this plan to bless the world with many good gifts so that people should know Him. Israel was at the heart of that mission for 2000 years from the days of Abraham onwards. They were given the gifts of God to enjoy and were called to know and love God in return, but they forgot. They didn't love God as they should and indeed preferred other so-called 'gods' instead; they didn't love each other as they should and there were all kinds of wrong and corrupt ways in the life of the people. God sent prophets to call them back to love God and others, but these prophets were ignored and ill-treated by Israel. What would God do next?

He sent His son. Jesus was sent into world to complete the mission of God to bless the world. "*Last of all...*" (v37) Through Jesus, God was making Himself known in the world in a new way; Jesus came to show us what God is like, God in human flesh and blood; Jesus came to teach the truth about God; He came to call people back to love God and to love others and these two great lighthouse principles were the heart of His ministry. But people didn't listen to Jesus and indeed the Jews plotted and planned to be rid of Him; "*The stone...*" (v42) He was rejected, He was killed, but the great paradox at the heart of the gospel is that this rejection, His death and then His resurrection were actually at the heart of God's plan to bless the world. Exactly through His death and resurrection all God's good gifts are made complete and our world is blessed precisely because Jesus died and was raised.

When Paul was trying to apply this great principle to the life of the early Church, he came up against a problem. There were other 'gods' that people worshipped, and followed. One of the great bothering issues of the day was about food: some of the food Christians ate was sacrificed to idols, usually because the butchers had their god of the butchers and made offerings to their Roman or Greek god and then sold the meat in the public meat market. Some Christians refused to eat it; others saw no problem with it. Either way, Paul takes time to remind the Christians in Corinth that there is only one God and only one Lord and that Jesus is Lord: "*For us...*" (1 Cor 8:6) Paul is reminding the Christians that Jesus is the centre of their faith and life, that Jesus is Lord of all, He is One to trust and to serve; Jesus is the heart of all things for the Church in Corinth and they should remember that and live by that even in the face of these other so-called 'gods'.

If you are looking for a book today on religion because you are looking to find answers to ultimate questions and go to the bookshop you will be confused because there are so many and they are all different and they all come from different religious (or sometimes no religious) viewpoints. Then we see the London buses with their empty slogan supported by the atheist soc: "there is probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." There are so many religious or spiritual messages about life and way to live life. For us as Christians, we need to remember that Jesus is the heart of all things; Jesus is the One whom God has given to us as our Saviour; Jesus is Lord and we should obey and serve Him and Him alone. God has made Himself known to us and our world in and through Jesus; He has promised to bless the world because Jesus has come.

Jesus is the heart of it all; this is part of our Church DNA. It is part of what has always made the Church tick; it is there as part of who we are and what we are; it is part of our history; it is part of our lifeblood as Church. Jesus is the heart of it all. So we have two tasks: 1)to rediscover that simple truth; 2)to live it out. Church life can become so complicated; we have built up a whole structure of institution, leadership, and procedures and there is a reason for all of it being there, but the danger of all of that superstructure is that we lose what is at the heart of it all and lose the simple message that Jesus is Lord. It is time for us to rediscover the simple truth that is at the heart of God's mission for the world and is at the heart of the life worship of the Church, and that is at the heart of the faith of Christian – Jesus is Lord.

It is one thing to say that Jesus is Lord and that's easy to do in the comfort of Church and the enthusiasm of worship; it is another thing to make Jesus Lord of life in every part. There are all kinds of episodes in the Church's past where it has been very clear that Jesus has not been Lord; there are things that the Church has done, things that Christians have done, that have been the very opposite of Jesus' teaching or example. People still look at the Church and are put off because we have not lived our lives with Jesus as Lord. Our task is to confess Jesus as Lord and to live with Jesus as Lord of our life, of our attitudes, our relationships, our time, money, energy. "The confession of "Jesus is Lord" is a challenge to take seriously the absolute and ongoing centrality of Jesus for Christianity as whole and thus for the local Church." (Hirsch p.99)

It really is very simple: the heart of it all is Jesus Christ. He is Saviour and Lord; He is sent by God to bless the world; He completes God's mission to bless the world and we come to know God through Jesus. When we rediscover that simple message – who knows what will happen! When we live out that message – who knows what might happen! God will bless us; He will bless the world through us.