

# From Palestine to Elswick

## *Jesus of Nazareth*

The Man, Jesus of Nazareth, to whose life and death secular sources such as Tacitus refer, lived in Palestine at the beginning of the Common Era. Traditionally, He is said to have been born in 0000; indeed our own numbering of years in the West is based on that assertion. We celebrate His Birth on **Christmas Day**.

Nothing much is known of His childhood. The Church teaches that Mary conceived Him through the miraculous intervention of God. By the time he reached adulthood, His family was living at Nazareth, a town in the former Kingdom of Israel, by then a province under the control of the Roman Empire.

Probably at about the age of thirty, He embarked upon a programme of itinerant preaching around Palestine. His challenges to the smug and cynical authorities, religious and secular, inevitably brought Him into conflict with them.

After about three years, as far as we can tell, He arrived at Jerusalem for the Passover (a Jewish festival commemorating their flight from slavery in Egypt). We are told that He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and adulated by a crowd. We commemorate this on **Palm Sunday**.

The crowds, however, quickly melted away and Jesus was left with His closest associates. In the evening of His arrest, He met for a meal (**The Last Supper**) with these remaining friends. Amongst other things, He instituted the **Mass** on the model of the Last Supper. All of this we commemorate on **Maundy Thursday**.

Following His arrest, Jesus was sentenced to execution by crucifixion by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate in some sort of collusion with the Jewish leaders. We commemorate His Death on **Good Friday**.

Christians believe that three days after His Crucifixion, He passed through death and His followers and friends encountered His Presence in their midst. We celebrate this **Resurrection** on **Easter Day**.

## *The Example of Christ*

The principal sources of information about the life and teaching of Christ are the four canonical Gospels (named after their presumed authors - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) in the New Testament. A Gospel is not so much a biography of Jesus of Nazareth as a reflexion on His life and work.

His teaching seems to stand in the tradition of a long line of prophets, who inveighed against injustice, exploitation, and a failure of God's people to fulfil the expectations of them.

Jesus generally avoided specific precepts, preferring rather to present people with general principles by which to govern one's life, leaving the individual to work out how these should be applied in a particular situation. This is why Christians can have significantly differing

opinions about many issues: often it is a question of how you balance various of the principles.

The strong political strand in the works of the prophets is subtler in Jesus' own teaching; but it is not possible to divorce the private from the public or the individual from the corporate. Many have said that Christ's teaching can be encapsulated in the so-called **Golden Rule** "**Treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.**" Simple as this may seem, the application of it requires considerable thought and reflexion.

### *After the Resurrection*

Fired with the conviction that Jesus was alive, His followers (His *disciples*) organised themselves into communities to perpetuate His memory and continue his work of preaching and teaching. The life of such communities was centred on the gathering for the Breaking of Bread - the act of worship we now call the Mass. They became known as "gatherings", the Greek for which is *ecclesia*, the word we translate "Church" and from which we derive other words such as 'ecclesiastical.'

In the period immediately following the Resurrection, twelve people (the *Apostles*), who had been Christ's inner circle of friends, were a strong element in the leadership of the Church or churches (since there were very quickly a number of communities or gatherings).

Others, however, also achieved prominence in these early days, most significantly a man we now call **Saint Paul** (his story is told in the Book of the Acts), whose letters to communities with which he had a connexion for a substantial part of the New Testament). The work of the Church quickly developed and spread, overwhelming the original leadership. As new communities were founded, local leadership was established. By midway through the second century a uniform model of government was rapidly establishing itself - every church looked to a *bishop* as its president, supported by a group of elders or *presbyters*. These bishops inherited many of the functions of the original Apostles (though they were not Apostles) and the Church teaches that there is an unbroken line of appointment from every bishop by another bishop, stretching back to the Apostles (which we call the *Apostolic Succession*).

The areas within the jurisdiction of a bishop (the bishop's *diocese* or *see*) began to be more clearly defined); prolific increases in numbers saw divisions of communities within a diocese, which were entrusted to the oversight of a presbyter, who fulfilled most of the bishop's functions within that subdivision of the diocese - and so developed the pattern of the parish (the area cared for by an elder) with its own priest (as we came to call the presbyter).

### *And so to England*

At the outset, Christians confined their activities to the area covered by Jesus. However, the work of Saint Paul broached new horizons and the map of Christian communities soon dotted a much larger part of the world. Churches were established in cosmopolitan centres such as Corinth, Thessalonica and, of course, Rome.

Once Christianity found a home in Rome, it quickly spread through the Empire as soldiers, merchants and civil servants moved around. This is how it came to England.

At first, very few people became Christians in England - those who did were mainly folks who came into contact with the Romans. The first reference to English Christians was written in about 208. By 314, there were several bishops in England, including a Bishop of York. The Diocese of Durham was created in 635. As Roman rule declined, the Christian communities were preserved in the Celtic fringes of Britain.

In 597, Saint Augustine landed at Canterbury (he later became the first Archbishop of Canterbury), sent by the Pope to win Britain for Christ. During the dark times, missionaries like Columba, Patrick and Ninian had been travelling around the North trying to establish Christianity there. Augustine did the same in the South.

Augustine was drifting northwards as the Celtic missionaries were heading south and there was a bit of friction when the two waves met. Augustine worked within Roman obedience whilst the Celts were fiercely independent. For years the two groups squabbled over various details of religious practice (such as the date of Easter). In 664, Saint Hilda, a patrician Abbess, hosted a synod (Church council) at her abbey in Whitby, where it was agreed that the Celts should submit to the authority of Rome.

This did not result, as one might have been expected, in a wholesale abandonment of Celtic traditions; rather there was a gentle blending of the Celtic ways with those of Rome; and not just in Britain, but more widely afield. The British Church, although obedient to Rome, retained her distinctiveness in many ways.

In 1066 the Normans arrived in England; William the Conqueror deposed the British bishops and imposed French ones on the English dioceses. After a bit more friction, things settled down again, not least since the French (or Gallic) Church had as strong a distinctiveness as the Celtic one had.

During the Middle Ages the Church owned and controlled a very great deal of land and other property. The bishops and other senior clerics were amongst the most powerful feudal lords in the country (the Bishop of Durham was particularly important, being one of the few effective instruments of government along the highly insecure border with the then independent and menacing Kingdom of Scotland).

In an era when martial prowess was the most highly prized skill, academic learning was largely confined to the ecclesiastical institutions, whose members were exempt from military service. The wealth and power of the Church in England combined with the fact that the clerical ranks provided most of the administrators gave the Church considerable influence. The ecclesiastical sphere was in many ways a parallel jurisdiction with the state: the Church did not pay tax for example, nor were priests subject to secular legal institutions. Tensions in the arrangement between the Crown and a Church often bubbled to the surface: Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered at Canterbury Cathedral by acolytes of Henry II in 1170 during one such stand-off.

From Rome, the Pope often tried to interfere with matters of state. Kings often discerned divided loyalties in the bishops. When Henry VIII acceded to the throne, after the Pope refused to grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, the King forced the Church to breach its ties with the Roman See.

The *Reformation* in England followed. Unlike the continental versions of reformation, the English Church, whether by intention or serendipity did not abandon its catholic order (bishops, priests and deacons among the laity). This allowed the Church of England to recover a more obviously Catholic character, which it did under the influence of the Oxford Movement in the nineteenth century.

From the reign of Henry VIII, the Church of England was born. The Archbishop of Canterbury was now the highest priestly authority and the Church was governed by Parliament not the Pope and his curia (the Vatican). Apart from a brief return to Roman obedience during the reign of Henry's daughter by Queen Catherine, Mary, the Church of England has continued to this day.

### ***The Anglican Communion***

During the days of the British Empire, the Church of England spread through much of the world, establishing new dioceses. Nowadays, most of these dioceses are governed independently of the English Church. They comprise the *Anglican Communion* .

Today the Anglican Communion is made up of thirty-eight provinces. A province is a cluster of dioceses, which look to one of its bishops as the president, usually called the archbishop. Provinces are often coterminous with secular geographical boundaries.

### ***And so to Elswick***

In England, there are two provinces - one in the South under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury and a smaller one in the North under the Archbishop of York.

The Diocese of Newcastle is part of the Province of York. It was created from part of the Diocese of Durham in 1882; it stretches from the River Tyne to the Scottish Border and from the North Sea, half way across England.

The Parish of Saint Matthew's was founded in 1869, though the present building was consecrated only in 1880. Since then there have been a number of amalgamations and most recently the adjacent parish of SS Philip and Augustine made their home at S Matthew's on 1st May 2003.