

# In what ways might following the example of Jesus transform Christians?

Readers write in with a variety of answers:

### Speak Courageously

Following Jesus for me means learning to reject the Victorian saccharine fiction of a gentle Jesus meek and mild and seeing Jesus as someone who was gentle with the least of my brethren and opened his personal fellowship to people the mosque and church look down on, while at the same time being a fractious, unpleasant and very not self-controlled, and very not restrained chastiser of powerful religious authorities. He was a rubbish politician the complete opposite of Mr Pontius Pilate.

What is Truth? I think Westerners who do Nice Middle Class Christianity forget that Jesus would not have fitted in socially at the church picnic. He, like the Prophet Muhammad, would have been disgusted at the British Muslim community's style of doing business, and its reduction of belief in the One God to a series of communal identity-affirming rituals.

Jesus wasn't a nice guy, and that's why I deeply admire him.

Muhammad al-Hussaini

### The Example Rather than the Edict

Compatibility for want of a better word, seems on the face of it easier for Muslims than for Christians! After all, Muslims consider Christians People of the Book and believe in Jesus, albeit in a different way. And the Qur'an states clearly:

*Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and do righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Surah 2 Baqarah [Cow]:62)*

For the Christians, there is no mention of Muslims and the claim of further religions in the Bible nor of the man called Muhammad (peace be upon him). But maybe this is irrelevant. The concept is the important factor. There are some important questions to ask of each other but if the concept is even God himself claims he will judge us in the Hereafter or there is no compulsion in religion then universal love for Humankind is easily identifiable within Scripture.

And this is the key to answering this question, do we follow the edicts of religion or do we follow the actual

example? I'm ashamed to say that certainly in the Islamic tradition these two things are often confused. Sometimes this has to do with tradition and sometimes with the passing down of religion.

And maybe through this process both traditions take a long hard look at the difference between what we currently follow and what our shining examples showed us.

Shaffiq Din

### Mix with Everyone

I see the Jesus of the Gospels coming through as a convivial person who enjoyed life, appreciated nature, ate with others, attended at least one marriage feast, walked around with his friends, went out in their fishing boats, and did not seek an easy life. He mixed with anyone, regardless of social status or moral reputation including people quite unlike himself: dishonest, adulterous, fond of the bottle and would mix easily even with women and children. He had a marked capacity for listening, taking people just as they were. He respected anyone of good will, but respected them in truth. He only let fly (e.g. against hypocrites) when reverence for God, or the truth, were at stake. His own respect for truthfulness, coupled with his attentiveness to each individual, made him quite a remarkable teacher.

None of us can emulate Jesus' innate goodness, still less his authority, but perhaps he incarnates for all who seek righteousness a model of inspiration and encouragement which any of us may strive to follow in freedom and hope.

Sister Kate Holmstrom

### Admire the Good in the Other

All human groups and organisations, including religious communities, have an inclination towards a kind of corporate self-congratulation at the expense of those who are other beyond our group. We bolster our own sense of identity and communal dignity by emphasising what is best in ourselves, and in our view of others, we can all too easily filter out what good there is to be seen in them and focus instead on what can be criticised. It is as if we can only feel good about

ourselves and confident in our identity by putting down the other.

It is clear from a number of Gospel stories that Jesus was free of this perverse and pervasive human tendency. Although his own people existed in tense relationship with various other peoples, we never sense in Jesus' teaching, for example, a desire to put down or demonise the other. On the contrary, what is striking is his positive appreciation of whatever is good in them. More than that, instead of reinforcing the normal negative attitudes to outsiders, he regularly challenges his followers to learn from what is admirable and exemplary in, for example, a Roman centurion, a Canaanite woman, or a Samaritan leper.

Like the disciples of Jesus, Christians and Muslims today often inherit and perpetuate negative views of those beyond their communities, and perhaps especially of each other, for well known historical reasons. The example of Jesus challenges us to try to see the other in a different way, not denying that there are differences between us, but opening ourselves to what is good in each other and asking ourselves what God might have to teach us through each other.

David Marshall

### Love Your Unlovely Neighbour

The Samaritans were neighbours of the Jews, descendants of those who repopulated the northern kingdom, retaining Jewish practices but having nothing to do with the Temple, hated and living segregated lives. In John's Gospel, the leaders say to Jesus, Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan? (8v48). Like Samaritans, Jesus was not kosher. He came from an ethnically mixed region Galilee of the Gentiles.

When we read the parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10v25-37), we need to put on Jewish shoes. Jesus addresses his own people, making a strong point about difference, challenging perceptions. In response to Jesus' question, Who was this man's neighbour? the legal expert cannot bring himself to say Samaritan. Jesus embarrassed him into giving the right answer.

# Christian-Muslim relationships?

This is a huge challenge for us. In following Jesus, we must see the radically different as God's creations, loved by God, equally capable of showing God's love, and God's agents of mercy and compassion.

We are often far behind the founders of our religions in living out core values of our faiths governing how we relate to others. We have differences – they tell us who we are – but for the benefit of enabling us to walk with God and create a supportive community. Jesus and people had dogmatic differences with the Samaritans, but Jesus showed that love and humanity comes first; difference and identity are for others, not against them. Christians and Muslims should be united in seeking to worship God and make practical sense of this – love your neighbour.

In saying 'love your enemies' Jesus challenged the idea of 'enemies'. Jesus' followers do not make or invent enemies. In Jesus' society, the idea of neighbour was tightly drawn. People of other religions and ethnicities were unclean and to be avoided if you were going to worship. Jesus' message stood that on its head. The Christian message welcomes, seeks radical equality, and makes a place for the other. Some say inter-faith dialogue is new, designed for days of reducing church attendance, and for liberals who 'water down their faith'. But have they experienced inter-faith dialogue, and wrestled with what it means to see 'the Samaritan' binding up the wounds of the assaulted or to be someone else's 'Samaritan'?

Julian Bond

## 'Be' in Christ

Asking whether living as Jesus lived would make a difference to inter-faith relations is in a sense the wrong question. The Christian gospel makes it clear that although the disciple must follow Jesus, she cannot follow in her own strength. She only follows Christ in so much as she allows him to live in her. The whole point is one of a Christian being 'in Christ' and of Christ being 'in her'. If this is the case, then my relationship with my sister Muslim

becomes one in which Jesus reaches out directly in all his love and compassion, through me, to her. Jesus thus becomes the centre of our relationship and the hermeneutic through which we interpret one another's faiths.

Caroline Seed

## Examine the Heart of Your Hearer

We should note the oblique manner in which Jesus framed much of his teaching, prompting his hearers to work out its relevance for themselves, rather than spelling it all out in detail.

1. *His use of questions.* We hardly realise sometimes that he is asking questions, but when we actually count them, we are astonished at their quantity.
2. *His use of parables.* The parables invite people to picture themselves in a situation, and see what their reaction is.
3. *The woman taken in adultery* (John 8). He says nothing, but writes in the dust. The accusers peer over each other, trying to make it out and perhaps thinking he is quoting OT law, perhaps guiltily guessing what it might be. They thus become their own accusers; that is a regular aim of Jesus.

Jesus sometimes finds himself in confrontational situations with people, but he seeks to undermine their assertions, and turn them round, as in Mark 7:16-23. By encouraging children to neglect their parents so as instead to make sacrifices to God, the teachers of the law lead them to break the commandment to honour their parents. 'A fine way of rejecting the commandment of God.' They bring their arguments ready made; Jesus prompts them to start again from scratch. They are more concerned to find him wrong than to be right themselves. See how he handles the questions thrown at him when he is in Jerusalem before his arrest.

When his opponents throw at him their assertions, instead of just replying with his own assertion, he examines theirs. He avoids the controversial approach often found today, among Christians as much as anyone else: 'Here is our Statement of Truth! If you do not fit it, you are in the Wrong!' 'You are wrong

because I am Right.' He wants us to look within.

Jim Spence

## A Model for Academic Study?

*How might Jesus' example guide us in Muslim-Christian studies? We have but one record of Jesus as a student with teachers: Luke's description of him in the Temple at the age of twelve. His parents find him 'sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers' (Luke 2:46-47, RSV).*

*Colin Chapman, chair of the CMCS Advisory Board, reflects that this not only guides us in our attitudes to learning, but also shows us what is involved in any meeting of minds when people are exploring each other's faith:*

Jesus is sitting among religious leaders and listening to what they are teaching. He genuinely wants to know what they think, and how they teach the faith of their fathers. When he asks questions, it is not to trip them up and embarrass them, but to draw them out into real dialogue. What impresses the observers about Jesus is that he seems to have understanding (as distinct from intelligence or knowledge), and is able to grasp the important issues. When he offers answers, therefore, it is in response to actual questions which people are asking.

What would it mean to see this as a model for dialogue between Christians and Muslims? 'Sitting among them... in their classes and homes, their meetings and mosques. 'Listening' to people talk about themselves and their faith, and reading their books. 'Asking questions' – not to 'score points' but to try to see the world as they see it.

If the exchange is going to be fruitful, we will need that understanding which enables us to discern the most important issues. And if we reach the stage of being able to offer answers, these will be answers to genuine questions in the minds of Muslims, and not simply the questions which we think they ought to be asking.

Colin Chapman