

Why Jesus matters this Christmas

By Greg Clarke, Director of CASE (www.case.edu.au)

With many societies confused about whether Christmas is, or should be, a Christian celebration, here are some suggested reasons why it really does matter what you think of Jesus at this time of year.

He's too famous to ignore

As a celebrity, there isn't anyone who comes close to Jesus. He is the ultimate rags to riches story. He was born in poverty to an unmarried mother, raised in a trade (carpentry, they say), but he struck everyone around him as wise beyond his years or experience.

He grew up to be a magnet to controversy, speaking out against the leaders of his day and challenging their hypocrisy and grand delusions.

His untimely death was a shock to his followers, and the rumours of his resurrection from the tomb a scandal and embarrassment to the Roman Empire.

But Jesus' fame outstripped anyone's expectations. His reputation gradually grew until a few centuries later, most of Europe and Asia Minor was engaged with 'Christianity', a full-blown religion that grew out of Jesus' life and words.

Followers of Jesus spread across the world, often sacrificing comfort and security to bring the news of Jesus to far-flung countries. Why? Because these Christians were compelled by Jesus' message of hope and rescue. It had to be shared.

Now, over a third of the world's population describes itself as 'Christian'—followers of Jesus. John Lennon might have thought The Beatles were more popular than Jesus, but his maths was out.

You can't escape him anyway

In a day in the life of the average Aussie, you have to work pretty hard to escape Jesus. He's everywhere you look.

Hop on the train, and sitting across from you is a teenager with a crucifix around her neck, a man reading *The Da Vinci Code* (it's about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, if you are one of the three people who hasn't read it!), and a nun (they call them 'brides of Christ').

Open up the paper, and there's Kevin Rudd or Peter Costello talking about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the Christian values of the nation. There's talk of wars between Christian groups and others. There's an ad for a charity, like Anglicare or St Vincent de Paul, which talks about caring for 'the least' in our society—words that come from the sayings of Jesus.

Listen to your iPod and you hear pop songs about him, positive or negative: Green Day's 'Jesus of Suburbia', pretty much anything by U2, *Idol* stars like Australia's Guy Sebastian (everyone knows he's a Christian) and America's Carrie Underwood singing "Jesus take the wheel".

Out the carriage window, there are church steeples with crosses on them. There's a billboard with Madonna and a huge metal cross. And there's a car going past with a fish sticker on the bumper bar—one of the oldest Christian symbols we know about.

You might not know anything about Jesus, but you can hardly get away from him. Even cursing brings him to mind.

How did this one man, born 2000 years ago, manage to have such a big impact on our society such that here we are still talking about him, writing books and songs about him, even wearing his symbols around our necks and on our bumper bars?

This Christmas is a great time to work out the answer.

He's our gateway to understanding our past

There is more authentic information from the ancient world about Jesus than there is about any other important figure. Some 24,000 different ancient manuscripts in the first 300 years after Jesus report to us the account of what he said and did on earth, and how his earliest followers understood him. Compare this with the seven ancient documents through which we know the philosopher Plato, or the ten or so that tell us what Caesar did.

If you want to understand the history of the Western world (and, indeed, some of the Eastern, too), you need to get a grasp of who Jesus is and the impact he has had on history.

In the first 100 years after Jesus' time on earth, the message about who he was and what he had said and done spread across the Roman Empire and beyond. Many people came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, as he had claimed to be, and many joined together as churches to worship him and pray to him as God.

In the fourth century, the emperor Constantine made it possible to be a Christian without fear of persecution and torture—a great relief to many! From that point on, Christianity began to gain a grip not only on people's hearts, but also on the structures of societies. Universities and schools were developed which taught Christian truths; laws and judicial systems were devised around Christian concepts of justice, forgiveness and mercy, a major development in Western society. Leaders of the church began to also have an influence on how the city was governed, what values and standards would be expected of people, and how the poor and disadvantaged would be treated (usually much better than they had been!).

In literature, art, architecture and music, we start to see from the Middle Ages onwards, the immense impact of Bible stories and Christian thinking on people's imaginations. Think of artists like Michelangelo, musicians like J.S. Bach and writers like John Donne. Their work is infused with knowledge of Christianity, and if we don't understand Christianity ourselves we have precious little hope of knowing what these great figures of our past were on about.

If you consider yourself a Westerner, and you don't know much about Jesus, you have a huge hole in your education. Blame the system, or start to patch up the hole yourself by reading the Bible this Christmas.

His philosophy of life has never been bettered

The great teachers of philosophy—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle—taught for a total of 130 years, filled many books with wisdom, and taught hundreds of students. Jesus taught for three years, never wrote a book and died before his teachings took off. And yet, how

many followers of the teachings of the famous philosophers do we find, compared with the number of Christians? Somehow, such teachers do not command authority in the way that Jesus does.

Certainly, there are other influential religious teachers who claim to teach the Good Life. Buddha, for example, taught that human beings would be better off if they could stop being so full of passions and desires, and realize that life is full of disappointment and suffering. Muhammad taught that submission to Allah's will, whatever the cost, would bring great rewards to human beings. Confucius taught that we are to respect our family and social structures, and discover for ourselves how to be good in this world.

But only one teacher suggests that all the answers to life's questions are ultimately found in him—in Jesus himself. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life". As C.S. Lewis (author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*), famously said, Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic or the lord of all as he claims. To say that all the answers to life are found in understanding YOU is either the insane claim of a megalomaniac or it is the truth.

As one renowned theologian said, "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way." (Karl Barth).

He helps us understand ourselves

It has been said that Jesus is one of the great psychologists of all times because by listening to him, we come to understand ourselves.

People often say that they wish they could see God. This is an incredibly naïve idea—it's a bit like saying you would like to feel how hot the sun really is. However, it springs from a good instinct in all of us. We would all like to *get up close* to God. We find it easier to trust people whom we know, and we feel like we know people more when we have met them—when we have seen and heard them.

In Jesus, we see and hear and encounter God. The Bible teaches that God was fully present in Jesus, that God fully entered the world and took on human flesh. That is the event we celebrate at Christmas, and Christians call it the 'incarnation'. It's the point at which God became human.

Because Jesus knew what it is like to be a human being, we can look to him for guidance about how to live, how to be good, how to please God and how to understand who God is.

In Jesus, we are given a model human being who also reveals the true nature of God to us. Through him we can not only know ourselves, but also know God.

He brings peace

If there is one time when everyone wants peace, it's Christmas. We want peace of mind, a holiday from the worries of business and getting the job done. We want peace in our families, so we can enjoy Christmas day for once, and not spend it fighting over the year's problems and disappointments. We want peace around the world, and we hope that Christmas might give us a break from the ongoing wars, famines and crises that fill the news every day.

But we don't hold our breath for it.

The peace that Christmas brings is always short-lived. It can be shattered by drunken Uncle Bill picking a fight with his ex-wife in front of the cousins. Or it can be utterly destroyed by a tsunami, washing away the hopes and dreams of a generation.

Jesus is described in the Bible as 'the Prince of Peace'. Whatever could this mean? It can hardly mean that those who follow Jesus suddenly have no conflict in their lives. It is more profound than that; the kind of peace that the Bible has in mind is a sense of meaning and purpose, a completeness, a sense of friendship between God and humanity, and a friendship between human beings which flows from it.

Such peace is only possible because Jesus turns the ways of the world upside down. Where the world seeks to destroy its enemies, Jesus says to love them. Where the world is always trying to 'supersize' itself, Jesus tells us to be content with what we have.

And Jesus can bring about peace with God for three reasons: he was God's representative on earth, he found a way of dealing with wickedness without destroying those responsible for it, and he provides a reason for us to be optimistic about the future. Read on...

He solves the greatest human dilemma

The greatest Christmas dilemma is what to buy the uncle you only see on this one day of the year. But the greatest human dilemma is no joke: what do we do about the evil in this world? There's evil in the form of terrorism, murder, corruption and sexual abuse; but there's also evil lurking inside every heart, just waiting for an opportunity to act. The greatest human dilemma is what to do about this state of affairs.

Christians believe that Jesus' birth was the beginning of God's solution to this most intractable human problem. The climax of the solution is the death of Jesus, in which the sacrificial death of an innocent man pays the penalty for the sins of guilty men and women. Because Jesus is God in the flesh, this sacrifice is something God has taken upon himself. In this way, he satisfies his own need to be just (so that sin doesn't go unpunished) and his strong desire to show mercy and kindness (by allowing sinners to escape punishment).

The baby born on the first Christmas was the solution to humanity's greatest problem, and we see the solution played out at what we call Easter, when we remember Jesus' death and resurrection.

Christians often complain when people call Christmas, "Xmas". They say it takes the "Christ" out of the day, and the "Christ" bit matters most to Christians, because it is a way of saying that Jesus is the one who came to save us from sin. A better abbreviation, if we have to have one, would be 't-mas', since the 't' keeps the cross in Christmas! So turn that 'X' on it's side and everyone is happy.

He gives us reason to be optimistic about the future

Christmas is usually a hopeful time. In Australia, we are always fairly hopeful of winning the cricket. In many families, there is hope that a good holiday will be had, that the sun will shine and we will enjoy life a bit more than we usually do. There is often a sense of optimism about the year ahead, as we make New Year's resolutions and plan how to improve our lives over the next twelve months.

For those who follow Jesus, this sense of Christmas optimism can last longer than a few holiday weeks. Following Jesus gives us hope, because Jesus showed us that there is a deeper meaning to this life than our own short and unpredictable lives would suggest. Jesus' teachings give us hope that we can understand life; Jesus' death gives us hope that our sins can be forgiven. Above all, Jesus' resurrection from the tomb gives us deep confidence that death can be defeated, and that Jesus' victory over death can be ours as well.

Christian confidence extends even further, because the risen Jesus promises to return and restore the earth to a place of joy, completeness and friendship with God, a place where God and humanity can thrive together, without the separation that sin has caused. This heavenly hope drives Christian optimism, not because it is "pie in the sky when you die", but because it suggests that *this* life is worth living, because God is already at work to bring about the future he has planned.

God's gift has already been given. Christmas was a guarantee that Easter would come, and that after Easter the hope of a great future would be as solid as a rock, for those who believe that Jesus really does matter.

This article may be copied, distributed and posted wherever and whenever by whomever, as long as it is reproduced in full. A shorter, printable version of the article can be found at [this address](#).