

Christ is not his surname

Unfortunate actual names Volume 1:

Justin Case, Barb Dwyer and, my personal favourite, Stan Still.

Comedy value aside, names can tell us a lot. Often, they reveal our gender, ethnicity, background, even our age. Most Alans, for instance, were born pre-1970, suggesting a revival is long overdue.

It may or may not surprise you that in 2012, in the US (where else?), more than 800 children were named Messiah – why do the words Monty and Python come to mind? Slightly less popular but equally surprising, 23 baby boys that year got to have the name 'Christ'. Now, you're probably thinking what were the parents thinking. Not only is Christ a tricky name to live up to and live with, these days it's less of a title and more of an exclamation or expletive.

In church, of course, we use the name Christ all the time. Usually it's interchangeable with, or stuck on the end of, the name Jesus. But what does that word 'Christ' mean?

Well, the first thing to say, of course, is that it's not Jesus' surname. In the Greek language in which the New Testament was written, Christos literally means 'Chosen' or 'Anointed' One.

I'm currently about 90 pages in to a book that is already living up to its subtitle; 'How a forgotten reality can change everything we see, hope for and believe'. Quite the claim.

Richard Rohr, the writer, calls this game-changing reality 'The Universal Christ'. It's a book I've had to read slowly and carefully, because every single line deserves to be heard and prayed through, and as I do, I'm finding within these pages a wisdom and a truth that speaks to my very deepest instincts. And here I need to say that I don't expect everyone to come with me on this; it's not the easiest stuff to get your head around anyway, and you'll have to forgive any 'heresy', remembering that in the final analysis that's what we all are... heretics!

Throughout the book, Rohr draws deeply from scripture and in his introduction, he writes; 'What if Christ is a name for the *transcendent within* of every 'thing' in the universe? What if Christ is a name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love (capital L)? What if Christ is another name for everything – in its fullness?'

Stop there, because if that doesn't either raise your heckles or take your breath away, then you possibly haven't heard it. What if Christ is another name for *everything* in its fullness?

In other words, Christ isn't just Jesus of Nazareth, Christ is what the Old Testament calls Wisdom (capital W), what John in the opening of his gospel calls the Word (capital W). Christ, from the beginning, is the original Love (capital L) *in everything*.

'God', Rohr says, 'loves things by becoming them'.

'God loves things by becoming them'. That's another way of talking about that word we often hear around Christmastime; incarnation. Literally God taking flesh; inhabiting what he's made.

And Rohr talks about three incarnations which deserve much more time than I have this morning.

The first incarnation of Christ, he says, is creation itself. In the beginning, God spoke, God breathed creation and so it became both his hiding place and his revelation. That's an incredible thought; God inhabits Creation. It rips apart that lie that some things are sacred and some things aren't. And it should, I hope, create in us a reverence, a deep sense of connectedness to all that is. It's why our souls, our essence, our instincts connect so deeply with the natural world; where do most of us sense that divine presence? In the garden, the forest, the mountain; by the ocean.

The second incarnation of Christ, of course, is in Jesus, but here's the thing - Jesus enters an already Christ soaked world. He came, as John says elsewhere in his letter, 'so that we could hear him, see him with our eyes, watch him, and touch him with our hands; the Word (capital W) who is life'.

And then the third incarnation. Well, for Rohr that's Christ within the 'ongoing Beloved community'; in Bible language, the Body of Christ; in other words, you and me.

In that beautiful passage at the beginning of John we read that the Word AKA Christ became flesh and dwelt among, or as one translation puts it, moved into the neighbourhood. Now Rohr points out that the Greek word here is *sarx*, which is the universal, generic word for flesh. So, John isn't just talking about one Jewish baby, he's talking about God inhabiting humanity.

That last verse from the letter to the Colossians in the readings for today [Colossian 1. 24-27] sums this up beautifully.

Paul writes, 'God has chosen to make known this mystery, which is.... *Christ in you*'.

God loves things by becoming them; that's the mystery, the forgotten reality the Early Church understood, and we've largely lost. Love (capital L) becomes incarnate; takes flesh, not only in Jesus, but in you, and in me and in *them*.

And the implications of this are huge. In the words of Richard Rohr, 'If the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply'.

When we get this it's hard to feel lonely in the world again. As Rohr again says, 'we're already in the presence of God, what's absent is awareness'.

Those who spend their lives speculating about the Second Coming fail to realise that Christ comes to us in every moment of every day, in each encounter, potentially in every created thing. Rohr says, wait for it, '*we are* the Second Coming of Christ'.

Gulp.

That's a thought that could transform, as the book's subtitle says, 'everything we see, hope for and believe'. It changes the way we look at ourselves, at others and at planet Earth.

God loves things by becoming them.

For me, it's a vision of a much bigger, much more inclusive, narrative or religion. The function of religion (in Latin re-ligio) is to realign or reconnect us with the Christ in everything. Christianity therefore becomes a religion that competes with and excludes no-one. It breaks down that nonsense of sacred vs secular. It inspires us to treat the ground we walk on and the people we meet as Christ with us.

Yesterday the world celebrated 50 years since that 'one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind'. And into those then turbulent times, the president of the United States, Richard Nixon spoke these words in an historic phone-call to

the astronauts – ‘Because of what you have done,’ he said, ‘the heavens have become a part of man’s world. And as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquillity, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquillity to Earth. For one priceless moment in the whole history of man, all the people on this Earth are truly one’.

The truth, of course, is that in Christ we are all One and have always been one with the heavens. In 2019 we live in equally, if not more, turbulent times, when it’s OK, for instance, for the current President of the United States to tell American-born citizens to go back to where they came from. We need, more than ever, to learn the truth that in Christ there is no Us and Them; for we are all connected; we are all One in Christ.

Albert Einstein once said, ‘There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle’.

My prayer is that I learn to live my life as the miracle it is; to look at myself and others and the world through the lens of Christ; that I wake up to the holy in every small act, in every chance encounter, in the face of friend and stranger; and, yes, of enemy.

God loves things by becoming them.

‘Christ this day be within and without me. Be in the hearts of each to whom I speak, in the mouths of those who speak unto me.’