

## CHRISTIANITY EXPLORED

### **An Excellent Start**

When I started planning for this autumn's *Christianity Explored* course, I set myself an ambitious prayer target for the number of participants. My goal was to have 45 people involved in our groups. So I am delighted to report that, so far, 46 people have taken part in one of our five groups!

### **The Value of Small Groups**

Those of us who have been committed to the course have found it both stimulating and challenging - not least, in what we have learned from one another. This is the value of our Small Group system. People are able to ask questions that concern them and share insights that other people hadn't even thought about. The discussions at the groups I have shared in have been excellent - so a big 'Thank you' is due to our Group Leaders. In **Col 3.16**, Paul encourages us to *let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom*. This is what we seek to do within our small groups - *teach each other* through our own personal, God-given insights. So, if you are not yet part of one, think about joining in with us!

I know that some people have managed to get along to only one or two sessions, for various reasons. So I am thinking of re-running the course in the New Year for those who have missed out on it this time around. Let me know if you would be interested in being part of such a group, so we can arrange a mutually convenient time to meet.

### **Getting into God's Word**

One of the greatest values of *Christianity Explored* is that it encourages participants to read right through Mark's Gospel for themselves over a six-week period. Questions are provided to help people study the text to understand what it means and how it applies to our lives for today. For some people on the course, it is the first time they have engaged in serious Bible Study - reading the text for themselves and working out what it means. This is a vital discipline for our growth as Christians. Many Christians rely too heavily on 'ready made meals' of spiritual food - our Sunday sermons. These are vital for our growth, of course, but they need to be supplemented by the discipline of personal Bible Study too.

Many have found it helpful to use John Blanchard's excellent book *Read, Mark Learn* alongside the *Christianity Explored* Participant's Guide to help them maintain the good habit of daily Bible reading. I am always encouraged when people say to me, "I was reading such-and-such in the Bible this week, and God taught me this and that."

Peter tells us to be *like newborn babies* when it comes to reading the Bible, *craving the pure spiritual milk* [of God's Word], *so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good* (**1 Peter 2.1-2**).

### **Lessons Learned so far**

Those of us on the course have greatly appreciated Rico Tice's DVD/video presentations.

- He has reminded us that, for us to get to know God with any certainty, **God has to introduce himself to us** - otherwise all we are engaged in is mere speculation or guesswork. And so this is what God has done by appearing on earth as the historic figure, Jesus Christ. *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*, Jesus was able to tell his disciples (**John 14.9**). *I and the Father are one*, he explained (**John 10.30**). And so John himself was able to write of Jesus, *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only* [i.e. Jesus Christ], *who is* [now back] *at the Father's side, has made him known. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth* (**John 1.18,14**).
- We have also been challenged to think about **the authority of Jesus**. Mark gives us five blocks of evidence concerning Jesus' authority - the authority with which he taught, his authority over every kind of sickness and disease, his authority over nature, his authority over death, and his authority to forgive sins. But then comes the personal challenge. Given the fact that Jesus possesses such complete authority, do I recognise the authority he has over my life? *Do I recognise his right to direct my life in all its smallest details?* Have I given him his rightful Lordship over every aspect of my life?
- In one of the Bible Studies, we were challenged to think about **how we respond to crises** (**Mark 4.40**). Do we respond to them in a natural way, with fear and panic? *Or have we learned to react differently, through our association with Jesus?* Have we learned to respond with faith, trusting him to see us through the storms of life?
- We then moved on to think about **the nature of sin**. Sin is not simply a matter of wrong words or actions. It has to do with the attitudes of our heart (**Mark 8.18-23**). If our hand or foot caused us to sin, we

could cut them off! If our eye caused us to sin, we could pluck it out (**Mark 9.43-47**). But what we can't do is cut our heart out! Yet that's where our real problem lies. And so the solution is to get *a new heart*. But where can we get a new heart from, a new core for our whole being? The answer is *from God*. Only he can take away our old diseased heart and give us a new one that beats to the rhythm of his own holy character. It's not a case of us trying to do better, or live a better life, through a process of self-improvement or self-reformation. We need a much more radical solution than that, one which only God can provide for us – a new heart for the core of our being, his own Holy Spirit living within us to re-shape every aspect of our life and character.

- And so we came to think in session four about *the cross*. As we reflected on Jesus' eerie words from his instrument of execution, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (**Mark 15.34**), we learned that *he was abandoned so that we need never be*. This is the wonderful truth at the heart of the Gospel. But *what's our reaction to what Christ has done for us?*
  - We were challenged to think about *the soldiers*, who busily got on with their duties, ignoring what Jesus had just done for them.
  - We thought about *the religious leaders*, who relied on commending themselves to God through their own dutiful religious devotion.
  - We thought about *Pilate*, who was more concerned about his own popularity than doing what was right.
  - We thought about *the detached bystander*, who simply wanted to see something spectacular happen.
  - And we thought about *the Roman Sergeant Major*, who got it right when he recognised that Jesus was truly "*The Son of God*".

We've learned all this and we're only at Week Four, not yet halfway through the Course! I am sure there will be many more lessons for us to learn between now and Week Ten. And then we have four bonus sessions lined up for the New Year, covering subjects like the Church, Reading the Bible, Prayer, and God's Gift of his Holy Spirit.

### **What's in Store for us?**

Let me remind you of some of the exciting events coming up over the next few weeks.

### **November**

- **7.30-9.00pm Friday 9<sup>th</sup> November: Gillian Gartry in Concert.** With a week to go, we have sold 80 tickets. We are hoping for an attendance of at least 100, so buy some more tickets in faith, and pass them on to your friends. It promises to be an excellent evening of music and Christian testimony.
- **7.30-10.00pm Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> November: Hope 2008 Road Show** at the Bethany Christian Centre, Houghton-le-Spring. Full details of the programme were given in last month's News Letter. Try and get along to it if you can.
- **7.00-9.00pm Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> November: Mezzanine Film Night.** (Please note, this is a week later than previously indicated to allow us more time to invite friends along to it, following the Gillian Gartry Concert). We will be running a special showing of the highly acclaimed film *The Narnia Chronicles*, based on CS Lewis' famous book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. We are planning to distribute free tickets to local residents. See Mandy Williams if you would like to help with this.
- **7.30pm, Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> November: our Church Members' Half-Annual General Meeting.** This is the meeting at which we agree our budget for the following year.
- **Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> November: 5.30pm International Fellowship Tea and 6.30pm Evening Service with Tony and Judith Sykes,** our BMS World Mission link missionaries.

### **December**

- **11.00am-12 noon, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December: All-Age Advent Service.** This will be a new venture for us, designed to encourage young and old alike to look forward to Christmas and Christ's return as King at the end of this present age.
- **7.00-9.00pm Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> December: Mezzanine Christmas Special.** See Gareth or Mandy Williams for further details.
- **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> December: Carol singing in Gateshead town Centre** (provisional). Further details to follow. See Ray or Val Hill.
- **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> December: 11.00am All-Age Christmas Service, and 6.30pm Christmas Carol Service.** Ray Hill and Gareth Williams are putting together a singing group for our Carol Service. Let them know if you would like to be a part of it.

*David Hunt*