

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** *Do you have any clues as to why God decided to send his Son into this world at that particular time, 2000 years ago, rather than another time in history?*

**Answer:** The question is the tip of an ice-berg concerning how culture and context have shaped the Christian message. (The illustration is of the head of Christ by Rembrandt).

Christianity is about a person called Jesus, from Nazareth in the Galilee region of Palestine. The written Gospels give you the flavour of this Jesus, especially his parables and his challenge to corrupt authority, but what we really know is that his impact on the people who met up with him was profound and life-changing.

Throughout the last 2000 years, many people have also had life-changing experiences as a result of contact with Jesus, through the Gospels, through the Church community, through mystical experiences and through prayer. The influence of Jesus has been thorough-going and on-going and his words and works are reflected in the best aspects of our society today.

The point is that as Jesus was born 2000 years ago, those who met him understood him in the light of their own context, socially, politically and theologically. In the first instance, Jesus was greeted as the Messiah of the Jewish community, from which he came. They read about the Messiah in the Jewish scriptures and attached the messianic appurtenances to Jesus as a matter of faith. But that didn't please the Jewish authorities who kicked the new Christian movement out of the synagogues. Where could it go from there? In fact, the Christian movement was to enter the world of Greek philosophy and there, be re-cast for a totally new context, with the Jewish bits being played down and a new theology embracing the person of Jesus.

With all religion, we enter the world of myths. The myth which seemed to provide the best fit for the Jesus movement was the myth about God coming to dwell on earth. Jesus became the focus of this mythology and so we have Incarnational theology, and Nativity stories.

The point is that whatever the truth about the historical Jesus, and we may never know the truth of this, 2000 years ago, they needed a philosophy or special concept to express their understanding of the importance of Jesus for them and as they saw him, for the future of the world. They used what they had and the rub for us Christians today is that this mythology may now be unsuited for the 21st Century, except as an historical

example and we may desperately need a new context to discover Jesus in, but we seem stuck, in the past, and any attempt to move on is resisted as heresy.

We won't ever be able to ditch the past, and nor would we want to, it is there as a fact. But just as the picture of Jesus changed as the Jewish context waned and the Greek context waxed, we will always need to find new ways of finding the true meaning of the life and work of Jesus, in every generation.

Here we have touched on some of the strengths of those who

wish to criticise or even rubbish Christianity, such as the Humanist movement and the secularists. You can see where they are coming from, can't you? I believe that we can re-cast our understanding of Jesus for the present day, and in some way, here lies the possibility of rapprochement with our critics. You can't defend the indefensible, and there is no point in trying, is there?

Jesus himself was tough on those for whom religion was a matter of outward form or show. He looked into the heart and saw the human issues shining out or seeking support. That is where we need to be focussing our minds and moving away from a mind-set of toeing the line on dogma, but seeking a deeper and more satisfying expression of the human values of Jesus of Nazareth.

We can do it. I think so, anyway!

