

Peter May profiles the wandering teacher and healer behind all the celebrations of AD 2000

Jesus - the pivot of history and medical care

‘THE CARE OF THE SICK, AS IT IS PRACTISED AROUND THE WORLD TODAY, HAS ITS ORIGINS IN THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST.’

It seems strange that the birth of any individual should become the internationally agreed pivotal point for counting history. How did this come about? Last year, BBC Radio Four carried out an opinion poll to name the most important English man or woman of the last millennium. A shortlist of six emerged with William Shakespeare being judged the winner.

If the same exercise were conducted throughout the world for the most important global figure of the last two millennia, a different shortlist would emerge. However, there can be little doubt that the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth would rise above the others.

Why has his influence permeated the nations and the centuries? Is it right that he should be so honoured in our modern age?

His uniqueness has first of all to do with his radical values. He produced a short list of the sort of people who find God's approval. Then as now, 'the happy people' were seen to be the wealthy, the befriended, the self-confident, the fulfilled, the strong, and the successful. Christ, however, taught that the ones who are really 'blessed' are the poor, the bereaved, the unpretentious, the dissatisfied, the merciful, the peacemakers, the oppressed and those whose integrity is unblemished before God.

At the start of his ministry, he had announced that he would bring good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind and release to the oppressed. The story of two millennia is that these things have been done in his name in all the nations of the world, both

physically and spiritually.

For instance, in the past century, the overthrow of both communism and apartheid owed more to the influence of Christ than any other figure. In the previous century, the abolition of slavery and the Factory Act were major reforms driven by Christian activists. Now, at the start of a new millennium, the campaign for international debt relief for the developing countries, initiated and driven by Christians, is being brought to fruition.

Of course, some terrible things have been done in his name as well. Cynics would even argue that they outweigh the good: murderous crusades, torturous inquisitions, appalling wars and atrocious acts of evil. However, while the perpetrators justified their deeds by claiming Christian allegiance, the hollowness of their pretensions is obvious. Christ's clear teaching condemns them all.

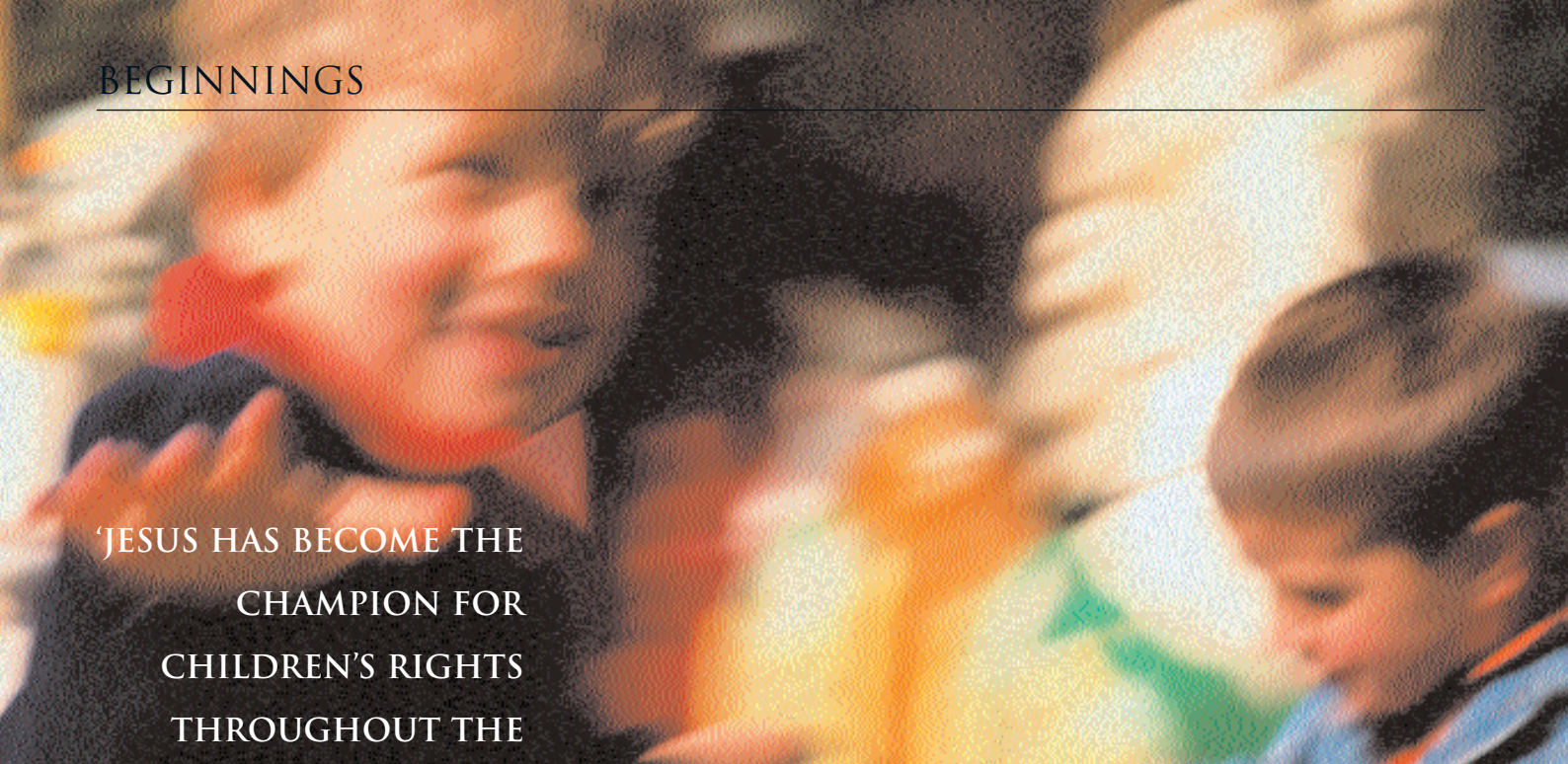
'Blessed are the peacemakers,' he taught. 'Those who take the sword will perish by the sword.' 'If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer him your other cheek as well. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.' 'Forgive, and you shall be forgiven.' 'You have heard it said of old, love your neighbour. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.'

Such language continues to stick in the gullet. When Archbishop Robert Runcie prayed for the defeated Argentinian soldiers at the Falkland Memorial Service in St Paul's Cathedral, he caused an outcry.

Ambroise Pare Surgical Innovator

Ambroise Pare (1510-1590) is remembered for the radical change in surgical practices that he brought about. One innovation was abandoning the cautery. During a very severe battle he ran out of boiling oil and did the best he could to treat the remaining patients with an egg and turpentine mixture. After noticing that the turpentine-treated patients recovered much faster and suffered far less pain, Pare gave up using the cautery. When congratulated for saving a man who was severely damaged, Pare replied; 'Je le pensy, Dieu le guaruy' (I dressed it [the wound], God healed him). On patient care he once said: 'You will have to render an account, not to the ancients, but to God for your humanity and skill.'





'JESUS HAS BECOME THE CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. HIS STATEMENT THAT A WOMAN WAS BETTER OFF BEING EDUCATED THAN SLAVING AWAY IN A KITCHEN, WAS CLEARLY TWO THOUSANDS YEARS AHEAD OF ITS TIME!'

**Edward Jenner
Smallpox prevention**



Edward Jenner (1749-1823), a GP from Gloucestershire, was responsible for one of the most significant discoveries in preventative medicine; that smallpox could be prevented by vaccination. Within three years knowledge of vaccination was widespread and many doctors were practising it. Jenner had a strong Christian faith and was married to a vicar's daughter who established a Sunday School for the village children. He refused many offers of more prestigious positions but remained in his village, vaccinating the poor free of charge.

Christ's golden rule, that we should treat others as we would want them to treat us, was unique to him. Others had put it negatively: you should not do to others what you would not want them to do to you. To live your life by that ethic would lead you to receive the pathetic epitaph, 'a lie never did anyone any harm' - a far cry from the imaginative, costly love that Christ demonstrated.

Many of Christ's values have been so absorbed by civilised nations that we take them for granted. We assume that children deserve our respect, but Christ had to reprimand his disciples who were driving them away. He taught his hearers not to look down on children. On one occasion, he called a child to the centre of the crowd and taught, 'Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.' Those who abuse children today as slaves, prostitutes, soldiers and objects of neglect and violence need to hear that chilling warning in our own time. Jesus has become the champion for children's rights throughout the world.

His statement that a woman was better off being educated than slaving away in a kitchen, was clearly two thousands years ahead of its time!

His attitude to the sick is of particular interest to health professionals. Whatever we are to understand by his healing miracles, it is clear from our sources - the Gospels - that healing the sick was a central part of his work. A woman with severe kyphosis, a boy with epilepsy, a man born blind, a woman with metrorrhagia, the paralysed, the oedematous, the manic, the deaf, the mute, the infected and the lame all received his compassion. We are told he healed them all - and if that was true, then he must have performed miracles, for these were not psychosomatic diseases.

While so-called healers have always existed (and there is no shortage today), modern, scientific medicine has its roots in ancient Greece. The study of illness and the treatment of disease are traced back to the school of Hippocrates. However, for all the intellectual interest they had in medicine, the ancient Greeks had little interest in hospitals. There has not been much prospect of cure until the last century. 'The real challenge down the ages has been to care.'

The care of the sick, as it is practised around the world today, has its origins in the compassion of Christ. The embracing of Christianity by the Roman Empire from AD313 allowed the rise of institutions devoted to nursing care. Important hospitals were rounded in Caesarea (369), Edessa (375), Monte Cassino (529), Iona (563), Ephesus (610) and St Albans (794).

By the Middle Ages, across Europe, churches and religious orders cared for the elderly, the weak, the insane, the

Jesus the Holistic Teacher

sick, and the dying, as well as passing travellers in need of shelter. The foundation charter of the Pantokrator hospital in Constantinople (1136) says that medical teaching also took place there.

In England, there are said to have been nearly 500 hospitals by the close of the fourteenth century. The main institutions were in cities. In London, St Bartholomew's had been founded in 1137; St Thomas's in 1215.

Christ taught that whenever the hungry are fed, strangers welcomed, the naked clothed and the sick or imprisoned visited, those deeds are done to Christ himself. A moving illustration as to how this worked out in practice comes from the history of the Knights of St John. This order was founded in AD 1113 and was formed from the sons of European nobility. Initially they worked for the care and protection of pilgrims en route to the Holy Land. Wherever they went, they built hospitals. They treated everyone, having no regard for race, creed, or colour. They cared for slaves as well as freemen, enemies as well as allies.

Knights provided care personally themselves, including the Grand Master. A twelfth century prayer from Acre (the modern Akko) records that they addressed their patients as 'Lord'. In the sixteenth century they were driven by the Turks to Malta, where they built the Grand Harbour of Valletta. Their hospital, overlooking the harbour, is nowadays an international conference centre. Its great ward is 520 feet long, and is still held to be the longest single roofed room in Europe. In its hospital days, it is said to have housed up to 600 beds. There were separate wards for the insane and the dying. They also ran an

outpatient service and attended the bedridden in their homes. Not only did these aristocrats call their patients 'Lord', but also they served their meals on silver platters. (Napoleon eventually had them melted down for bullion, a hoard weighing 3,449 pounds.)

It wasn't just Christ's teaching that made the impact. His life was a vivid demonstration of his values. He practised what he preached. This is most movingly described in the events surrounding his arrest, torture and execution. Even as he hung on his cross, he prayed for his murderers. 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'

Prophetically, even in the first century, the breath-taking claim 'I am the Light of the World' was attributed to his lips. He spoke with an extraordinary sense of his own authority. He called his hearers, not just to take note of his teaching, but to believe in him. He shocked the Jews by saying that he forgave people their sins against God. He also said that to see him was to see God the Father.

The explosive growth of Christianity in the ancient world followed the discovery that his tomb was empty. His disciples claimed he had been raised to life. Even when put to the sword, they stuck to their testimony. Was this the greatest deception of all time, or a firm foundation for hope in a suffering world?

Has God uniquely declared himself in the person of Christ, holding out to all of us the possibility of forgiveness and a new start? We must each draw our own conclusions.

Peter May is a General Practitioner in Southampton and a member of the Church of England General Synod.

Health has been defined by the WHO as a state of complete physical, mental and social well being: not simply an absence of illness or disease. This definition understands health as involving the whole person. It's holistic, even if it fails to mention the need for spiritual health!

But what did Jesus actually teach about health? Jesus is similarly holistic. He was, par excellence, concerned with the whole person. His teaching goes to the heart of problems - attitudes and aspirations - and not just their symptoms.

This is well illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount, a pithy summary of the main themes of what Jesus taught, recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

- 5:24** Anger is bad for you... 'Be reconciled to your brother'.
- 5:28** Don't harbour bad thoughts... 'Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart'.
- 5:37** Have integrity ... 'Let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no".'
- 5:39** Don't retaliate and make things worse... 'If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also'.
- 5:44** Nursing grudges is bad for you... 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'.
- 6:14** Keep short accounts with people... 'Forgive men when they sin against you'.
- 6:19** Cultivate simplicity of lifestyle... 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth'.
- 6:25,33** Avoid anxiety... 'Do not worry about your life... but seek first his [God's] kingdom'.
- 7:12** Social concern... 'In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you'.

Here are recipes of how to live a healthy life in an unhealthy world. The Christian way is a way of health - in the WHO sense.

Brian Hogbin is a retired consultant in General Surgery

Thomas Sydenham Plague Doctor

Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689) has been called the 'English Hippocrates' and the father of English medicine. He was a man of deep Christian faith in the Puritan tradition and this was the spur that helped him discard much of the speculation and reliance on classical dogma. He stressed the importance of personal, scientific observation in medicine; 'You must go to the bedside. It is there alone that you can learn disease,' he often said.

During the Great Plague of London, Sydenham gained enormous respect by remaining to treat the sick and dying when many doctors quit the capital. His clinical descriptions of diseases including scarlet fever and gout also won him acclaim. He opposed use of complicated prescriptions, preferring to promote simple and natural remedies.

