

SERMON AT GELORUP 23/8/2020: 12TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: OS 21

GEOFF CHADWICK: “WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Gospel Reading

Matthew 16.13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ 14 And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ 15 He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ 16 Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ 17 And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Simon Peter tells Jesus who he is. Then Jesus tells Simon Peter who he is.

When we read Mtt’s Gospel it is good to remember that the original text was meant for Mtt’s early Jewish church. The author has taken the stories of Jesus and moulded them to address the circumstances of that early church. We, 2000 years later, may hear the same words but may mis the original meaning because our context is rather different. So, this morning we hear Mtt addressing the Christological question of his time. As the new and unique Gospel of Jesus was being proclaimed it was easy for the community to wonder who this Jesus might be. Was he a god in the manner of the Roman gods? Was he a god in the manner of Caesar- after all they are in the town of Caesarea Philippi? Or was he an extraordinary human in the manner of John the Baptist, or one of the prophets – even Elijah or Jeremiah?

Maybe there’s another possibility: “The Son of the Living God?” Whatever that means.

Of course, according to the text the correct answer is “The Son of the Living God?” But what authority is there for such an answer? Yes it is Peter, the early disciple and founder of the church. According to the story he got it right, and so the early church was to trust his testimony. But there’s more. Peter is endorsed by Jesus and given a new identity. Jesus says to him:

“... you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it” (Mtt16:18, NRSV).

There’s a curious twist here: Simon Peter tells Jesus who he is. Then Jesus tells Simon Peter who he is.

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A few years ago, there was a dress-up day for the Year 12s at Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School. The theme was fantasy characters. So some ghosts turned up, Cinderella turned up, Sleeping Beauty slumbered along, Santa Claus arrived (sorry but he’s not real) Golam made an appearance, Harry Potter flashed his forehead, the Seven Dwarfs glided their way in and even Jesus arrived in fine flowing robes!

How stunned I was to discover that, after 12 years Religious Education at this school, some of my students considered Jesus to be a fantasy figure! Somehow, after all those RAPS lessons I had failed! Jesus isn’t real!

... *“Who do you say that I am?”*

“A make-believe person made up in the minds of religious fanatics!”

But I’m worried. Are my students just a reflection of our general population? Is there really a perception out there that *“Jesus is a make-believe person made up in the minds of religious fanatics!”*

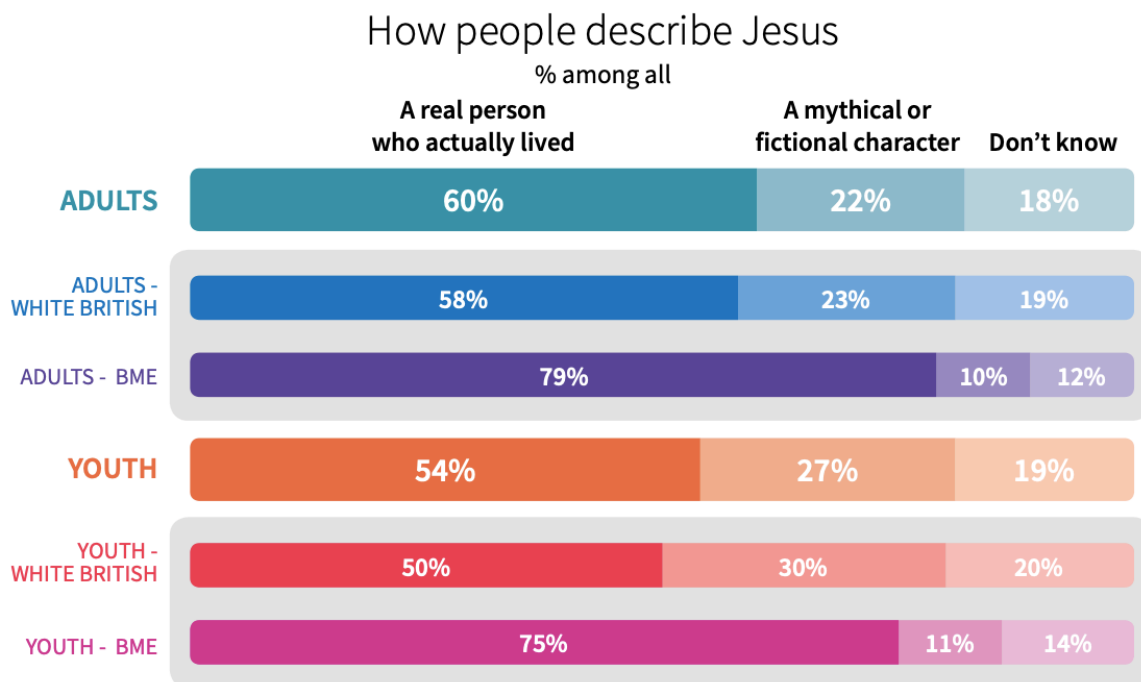
On that day I vowed to write a Unit on “Jesus is a Real Person” as part of the Religious Education Course. So now I have my Year 8 students looking at ancient quotes from first Century historians and videos showing the influence of Christianity on history.

“Who do you say that I am?” “A real person- at least.”

Since then I’ve looked up some research from the 2016 *What people in England think of Jesus, Christians and evangelism Report* of the Church of England

<https://talkingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Talking-Jesus-dig-deeper.pdf>

Here are some results:



*Youth are aged 11-18 (in 2016)

*BME are Black, minority ethnic groups

Summarizing their findings (p11):

JESUS' IDENTITY

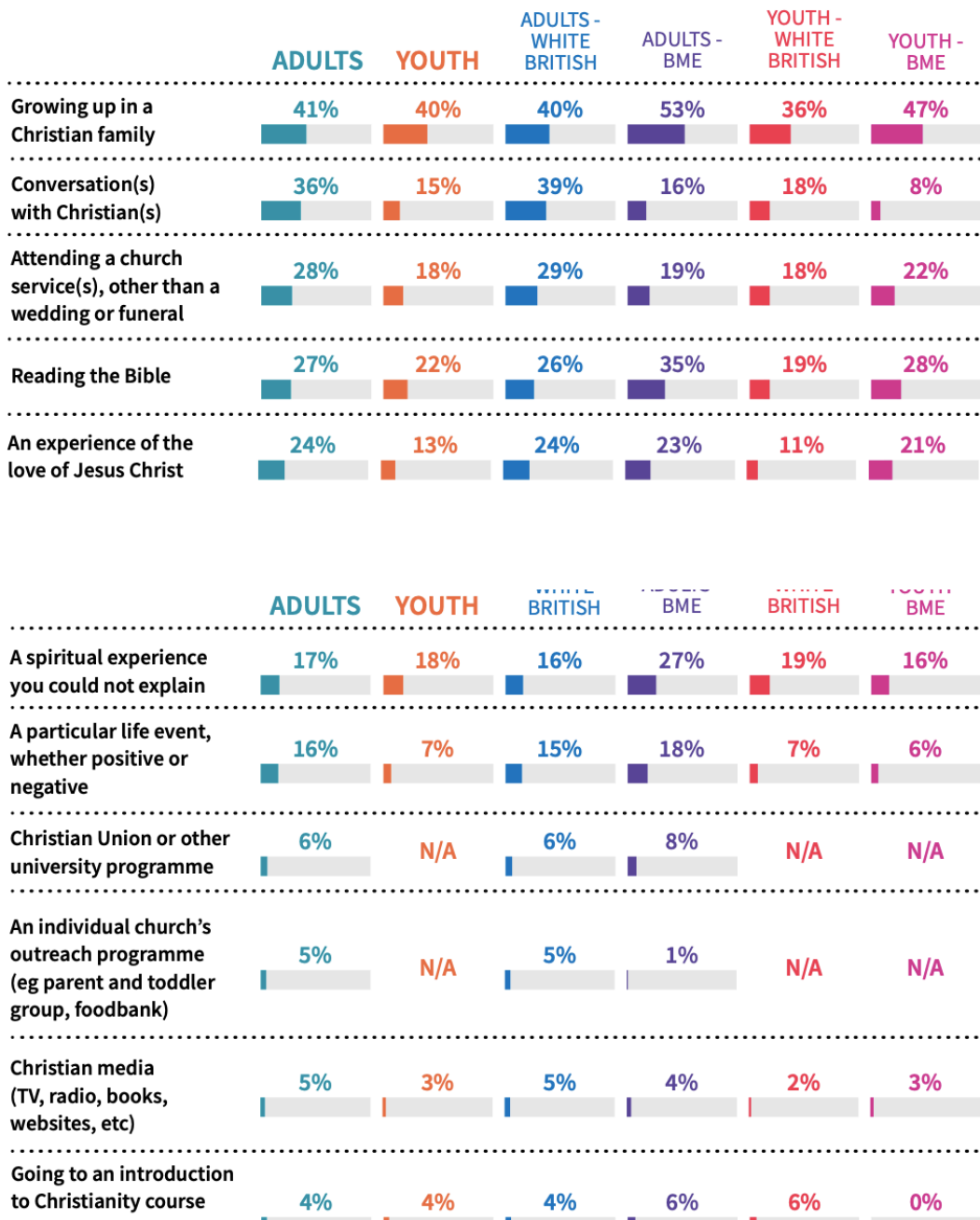
Approximately one in five of adults (21%) and young people (22%) say they believe Jesus was God in human form, and three in 10 (29%) say they believe he was a prophet. Alongside this, almost a quarter of adults (22%) and young people (27%) believe Jesus was a mythical or fictional character.

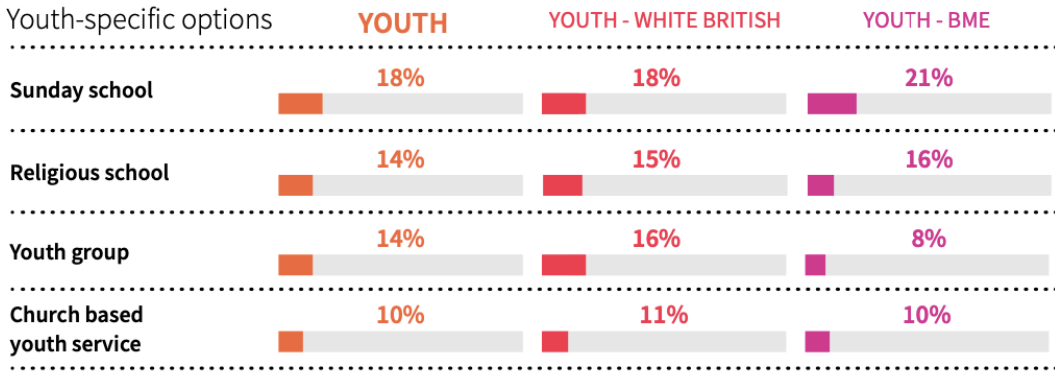
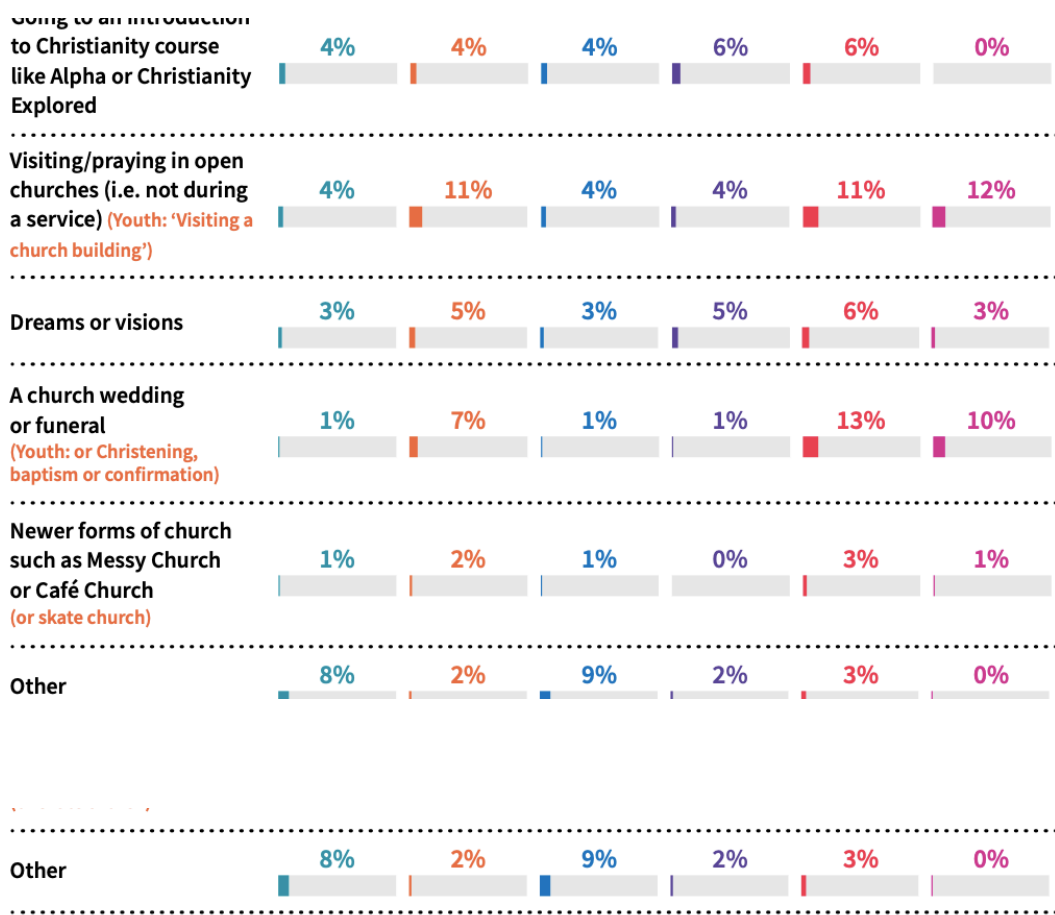
Adults are slightly more likely than young people to say that Jesus was a normal human being (17% compared to 13%), or that they don't know (9% compared to 7%).

Further on the report lists the *The two or three factors which most influenced people in becoming a Christian*. These are:

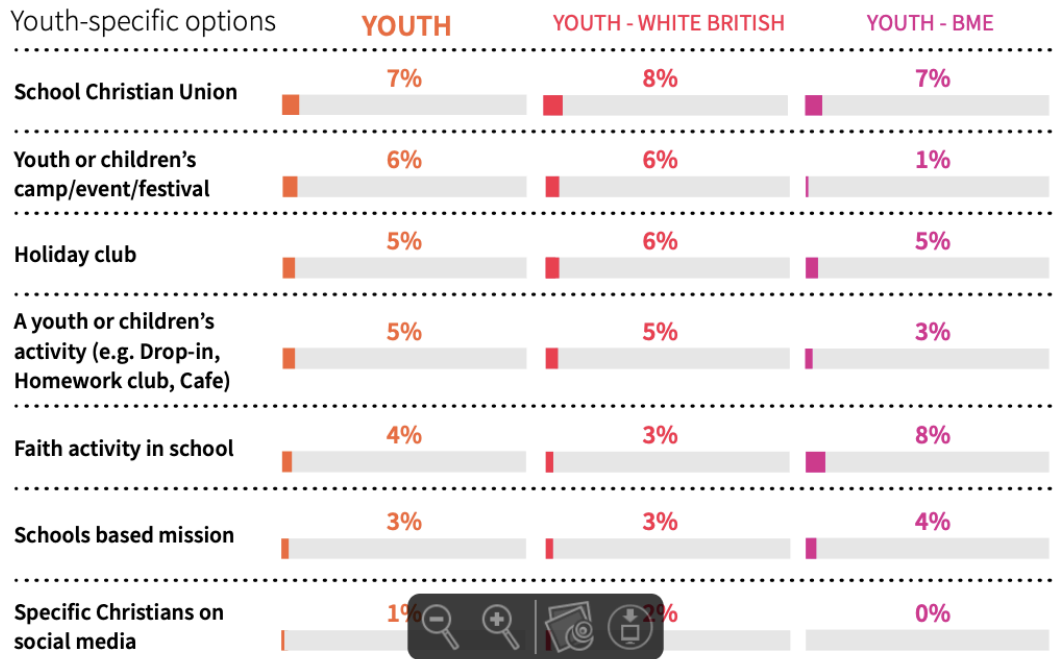
The two or three factors which most influenced people in becoming a Christian

% among practising Christians





(table continued on next page)



- Not surprisingly the main influences on someone adopting Christianity are:
- Growing up in a Christian family 41%,
- Conversations with Christians 36%
- Attending church services 28%.
- An Experience of the Love of Jesus 24%
- A Spiritual Experience 17%
- As far as Religious Based Schools go the figure is 14%.

So it seems to me that what we say about Jesus, and our faith really matters when we are at church, really matters when we are speaking as Christians and really matters when people attend a church service.

If so, we may have some work to do!

So who do you say Jesus is?

- A real person?
- A prophet?
- The Messiah?
- The Son of the Living God?
- No sure?
- Don't know?

Maybe your answer changes depending on what mood you are in or on how life is going!

Also we don't live in First Century Jewish or Roman influenced world. Mention Elijah or Jeremiah to the general public and it is unlikely that they would think of a biblical prophet. We no longer practice Caesar worship but maybe other gods may have taken the place. Fame, glamour, riches, athletic prowess...

So, in the light of the research that has been done, I wonder how we might respond to the general public's perception of Jesus?

I think we need to re-package Peter's statement in modern terms.

'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Let's un-pack it a bit.

In a modern world of many would-be messiahs, fallen idols and Caesars (leaders) gone bad, I think we need to say that Jesus is "the one". If we are looking for an authentic, human role model, then Jesus takes the guess work out of who to follow. Jesus shows us what it means to live an authentic human life.

Furthermore, Jesus as "Son of the **living** God, reminds us that God is on the side of **life**.

Destruction, mayhem and chaos are not God's way. Life is his way. Life in all its complexity, beauty, determination and brilliance is his way. I don't mean this in a "*sugar coated-Polyanna*" sort of way. I'm talking about life that knows struggle; life that has overcome ugliness; and life that has wrestled with darkness. This is life that sits on the correct side of goodness.

I think these are the sorts of conversations we need to have with people. Through Jesus we know that God is on the good side of life. As a Christian I am prepared to celebrate and proclaim this message.

Even so, the research I mentioned earlier, pointed out that Anglicans aren't very good at these sorts of conversations. We seem to be shy! So the researchers suggested that we practise them with our fellow church members before we engage an unsuspecting public! I think this is true so I'm going to issue a challenge!

So just for a minute or two; in pairs, I invite you to ask your friend:

“Who do you say Jesus is?”

Then listen respectfully to the answer.

Now if you're really game why don't you tell the other person who you think they are!

Then swap places.

Don't worry if your shy about this or get your words or muddled up – it might mean you're an Anglican! On the other-hand, shyness and muddled-up words might also be a sign of humility – and that's not such a bad thing!

And speaking of humility here's a helpful little quote:

What makes the Christian God (revealed in Christ) unique is not the fact that he is Almighty, Supreme, King of kings and Lord of lords. All other religions with a concept of a Supreme Being believe all these about their god. The uniqueness of the Christian God is lies in the fact that he is prepared and willing to descend from his throne, lay aside his crown, dirty his hands, walk in the slums and wash the feet of his disciples! ... By his example, Jesus is teaching us that it takes a cross to fix a broken world, not a crown. (Azmuah, 2007) p305

Azmuah, J. (2007). *Following Jesus as Unique Lord and Saviour in a Broken Pluralistic World* (Evangelical Review of Theology ed., Vol. 31:4). Paternoster Periodicals

2016 *The What people in England think of Jesus, Christians and evangelism Report* of the Church of England

<https://talkingjesus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Talking-Jesus-dig-deeper.pdf>

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.