

318 Christian witness in a multi-faith society

I'm going to take as read the first stage of any Christian witness: being a Jesus-like person, doing Jesus-like things – listening, loving and caring to the point of self-sacrifice. But what if we are asked to talk about our faith? Today's thoughts came when I was asked to pray for an overseas student meal, to include a talk about Easter.

Personally, I'd tell them the gospel – no, I mean *the* gospel, the story of what happened. Let me try...

In the best of worlds, religion should help people to live better lives, cope with difficulty and care for one another, especially those less fortunate. Sadly, we manage to mess things up, and while many good things have been done in the name of religion, some really terrible things have also been done over the millennia. But let me just explain how the Christian faith started.

It was based around the teachings of a man called Jesus, who lived in Nazareth, 90 miles north of Jerusalem. He was brought up in the Jewish religion, which had already been practised for well over 1000 years. He based his teaching on the Jewish holy books, but sadly the Jewish leaders of the time had added all sorts of rules and regulations, which tended to make people feel excluded, rather than helping them to live better lives.

His teaching seemed to polarise people: many loved his way of life and his teaching, but others – mainly the stricter Jewish leaders – felt he was speaking against their religion. It all came to a head and, by working with the Roman rulers, they managed to have him executed. Now the Romans used a particularly nasty, humiliating and degrading form of execution: publicly tying people – or even nailing them – to a wooden cross.

His followers were demoralised, but then rumours started to spread, that Jesus had come back to life. Within a few weeks, people were claiming openly and publicly that they had seen him, talked to him and even eaten food with him. And then again, a few weeks later, they said he had disappeared!

If I'd heard that, I'd have been pretty sceptical, but they went on insisting that this showed that Jesus' teaching and way of life was the fulfilment of the Jewish teaching.

The Romans didn't like such mass movements, and they knew how to deal with things they didn't like: many of Jesus' followers lost their lives. Others fled to the surrounding areas, but they continued to tell people the good news about Jesus, and this wasn't just Jews; non-Jews were drawn into the movement, too. And, over the years, it spread throughout the Roman Empire.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the movement got turned into a religion with its own rules and regulations, but when and where people have gone back to Jesus' teaching, lives have been changed for the better. And that's how we try to live our lives.