

## Week 1

### The little man seeking to see

The New Testament is full of people with questions.

I've always enjoyed the story of Zacchaeus (pronounced Zak-e-us). He asked a question without opening his mouth. Instead, he climbed a tree. Luke tells the story:

**And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.<sup>1</sup>**

On the one hand, it's an amusing picture. A vertically challenged man can't see over the heads in a crowd, so he climbs a tree in order to get a glimpse. But it's also a story about a man, who was so intrigued about Jesus, and so full of questions, *that he simply had to see*. My longing is that you would be infected with the spirit of Zacchaeus. My fear is that many of us have simply stopped asking questions. Zacchaeus however, was "seeking to see".

Rosaria Butterfield was a post-modern professor of English at Syracuse University in New York State. She has written about her Christian conversion in her book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*. She paints an amusing picture of how she used to park her car outside a church in her neighbourhood. She was curious about what went on inside.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 19:2-4

**What did they do there at this Reformed Presbyterian Church? I wondered...Sometimes I would just sit there and read the *New York Times* and drink my Starbucks coffee and watch. I laughed out loud once realizing I had become a church stalker!<sup>2</sup>**

I think church stalkers are few and far between today. When was the last time you asked serious questions about life, the universe and everything? Many people today have stopped asking questions. I want you to start again.

### **The rabbit's fur**

One of my friends is very good (at least, better than me) at card tricks. When you watch a card trick, you do so with awe and wonder. You want to know how the trick is done. Jostein Gaarder, a Norwegian philosopher, likens philosophy to a magic trick. The extract below is a little weird, but bear with it. He describes how philosophy has its origins in man's sense of wonder. He writes:

**Man thought it was so astonishing to be alive that philosophical questions arose of their own accord.**

**It is like watching a magic trick. We cannot understand how it is done. So we ask: how can the magician change a couple of white silk scarves into a live rabbit?**

**A lot of people experience the world with the same incredulity as when a magician suddenly pulls a rabbit out of a hat which has just been shown to them empty.**

**In the case of the rabbit, we know the magician has tricked us. What we would like to know is just how he did it. But when it comes to the world it's somewhat different. We know that the world is not all sleight of hand and deception because here we are in it, we are part of it.**

**Actually, we are the white rabbit being pulled out of the hat. The only difference between us and**

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<sup>2</sup> Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*, Crown and Covenant Publications 2014 p15-16

**the white rabbit is that the rabbit does not realize it is taking part in a magic trick. Unlike us. We feel we are part of something mysterious and we would like to know how it all works...**

**As far as the white rabbit is concerned, it might be better to compare it with the whole universe. We who live here are microscopic insects existing deep down in the rabbit's fur. But philosophers are always trying to climb up the fine hairs of the fur in order to stare right into the magician's eyes.<sup>3</sup>**

I told you it was weird. I bet you've never been compared to a microscopic insect living deep in a rabbit's fur before. Gaarder says philosophers are the brave insects that climb up the fine hairs of the rabbit's fur. They want to know the secret to the trick. They are the ones hungry for truth.

Children are generally much more inquisitive than adults. Children will often ask the questions that we stopped asking a long time ago, like - why is the sky blue? Every now and then, we might start to ask those questions again. The *New Scientist* magazine has a 'Last Word' column where readers can get their questions answered. These columns have been compiled into two books. The first is called *Does Anything Eat Wasps?* The second – *Why Don't Penguins Feet Freeze?* Both are good questions and each book has many others inside! But, aside from the occasional curious question, have we in fact, lost a real sense of awe and wonder?

Gaarder recognises in his strange illustration that not all people climb the rabbit's fine hairs. He writes:

**All mortals are born at the very tip of the rabbit's fine hairs, where they are in a position to wonder at the impossibility of the trick. But as they grow older they work themselves ever deeper into the fur. And there they stay. They become so comfortable they never risk crawling back up the fragile hairs again. Only philosophers embark on this perilous expedition to the**

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<sup>3</sup> Gaarder p13

**outermost reaches of language and existence. Some of them fall off, but others cling on desperately and yell at the people nestling deep in the snug softness, stuffing themselves with delicious food and drink.**

**'Ladies and gentlemen,' they yell, 'we are floating in space!' But none of the people down there care.**

**'What a bunch of troublemakers!' they say. And they keep on chatting: Would you pass the butter, please? How much have our stocks risen today? What is the price of tomatoes?'**<sup>4</sup>

What kind of person are you? Have you stopped asking big questions? Are you more concerned with trivialities? There are lots of reasons we might have stopped asking big questions. Many of us lead busy lives - we just don't have time to stop and think. Maybe if we're honest, we don't really want to stop, pause and reflect on big questions. Does my life have meaning? Why am I here? What will happen when I die?

Jostein Gaarder's passion is for philosophy – but I'm not writing about philosophy. I want to tell you about the Christian faith. I want to tell you what the Bible says.

Now...are you still with me? Many people have already rejected Christianity out of hand. When my eldest son was in his first year of comprehensive school, his Religious Education class were asked to show by raising their hands, whether they believed in God. The teacher did not necessarily want to identify Christians, but theists – those who believed in God's existence. Only one hand in a class of thirty was raised. Although only a small sample from a little valley community in South Wales, it seems many of us have already made up our minds. However, is our

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid p17

rejection of God because we have thought things through? Or is it simply, that we have stopped climbing the rabbit's fur?

When my grandmother died a number of years ago, the minister conducting the funeral preached on a verse from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. It says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart."<sup>5</sup> The verse says it's better to go to a funeral than to a party. Why would someone say that? Because a funeral reminds the living what the end of all human beings will be.

### **Jesus wants your attention**

In Luke's gospel, there is an account of an occasion when people went to Jesus to tell him the news of the day. Something awful had happened in the city of Jerusalem and people told Jesus all about it. Luke writes:

**There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them; so you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."**<sup>6</sup>

Some ordinary Galileans had gone up to Jerusalem to do what other Jews did – offer sacrifice in the temple. It seems that when they were in the very act of their worship and offering sacrifice, they were killed. Pilate, the Roman governor, is held responsible. For whatever reason, it seems Roman soldiers had killed innocent Jews

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<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:2

<sup>6</sup> Luke 13:1-5

whilst they were worshipping, on the orders of Pilate. There is the gruesome detail of their blood mixing with the animal blood they brought to sacrifice.

As Jesus speaks to those who brought him the news, he makes reference to another event. There had been eighteen people going about their business one day in Jerusalem, when a tower fell on them and they were killed. Our news headlines today, 2000 years later, contain similar stories of tragedy and seemingly arbitrary loss of life.

A couple of years ago one of my neighbours stopped me in the street and told me exactly why he could never be a Christian. His problem was a close personal connection to suffering. Maybe you have a similar objection. You say you cannot believe in a God who would allow terrible events of suffering to occur. How can it be fair that innocent Jews go up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice and are killed arbitrarily by Roman soldiers? How can it be right that eighteen people go about their business one day in Jerusalem when a tower falls and kills them? Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can it be right that people on an evening out in Manchester and London in 2017 become the victims of terrorism? How can it be fair that some people get caught up in a fire in a London tower block whose ferocity is unprecedented? These questions might bother us. They bothered the people that Jesus spoke to. And so we find these people bringing the events to his attention.

In his response to this news report, Jesus begins by correcting a misconception. It seems that some had reached the conclusion that the victims of these events must have been particularly bad people. Jesus said, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" He then answered his own question – "No." If we are not victims of tragedy, it is not because we are better than people who are.

After Jesus corrects their faulty thinking, we might expect him to go on and explain the problem of suffering. But that is not what Jesus did on this occasion. That is not to say that the Bible does not give answers to questions about suffering, but it's not what Jesus did then. Instead, he wanted to use the opportunity to talk about something else.

Twice, Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." We might have an idea in our heads that Jesus was just a miracle worker. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He did nice things. But you don't have to read very far in the gospels to see that Jesus said some hard things that would not have made him popular. This is one example. Jesus told the people they needed to repent.

The word repent means a complete change of direction. Jesus implies that people have got life completely wrong. They are going in the wrong direction and they need to turn around. He says, "This is serious. Unless you turn around, you will perish too."

Death will come to all of us. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, on the occasion of his father's death wrote:

*Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

We all share a common resistance to death, but all of us will die. The message of Jesus to the people was clear - you need to change direction, before death comes to you.

Jesus went on to tell the parable of *The Barren Fig Tree*.

**And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”<sup>7</sup>**

What do you do with a useless fig tree that no longer bears fruit? Most people would cut it down and use the space for something else. But in the story that Jesus tells, the vinedresser gives it one more chance. The point of Jesus’ parable is clear - every day you wake up with a healthy body and a mind that still functions, is another day God gives you to change direction.

In 1913, in a little South Wales village called Senghenydd there was a huge explosion at the Universal Colliery. It was and still is, the biggest mining disaster in British history. Four hundred and thirty nine miners were killed. My great-grandfather was one. Today, there is a memorial garden in the village, with tiles giving the names and addresses of the men killed. I took my children there a few years ago and we found our ancestor’s name with his address. We walked around the village and found the house he’d lived in over hundred years ago. That stone terraced house has probably changed very little in its outward appearance. Somehow, seeing the house, made the story much more real. I calculated how my grandfather would have been only six years of age when his father was killed. I imagined a man who went out through that front door on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1913 for the last time. He never came home.

Jesus taught the people that every tragedy reminds us that each day is another opportunity to change direction. As people heard the news about worshippers being

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 13:6-9

murdered in a Jewish temple and towers falling on passers-by, they were to reflect that *they* were still alive. God had given *them* another day.

C.S.Lewis, Cambridge academic and author wrote in his book *The Problem of Pain*,

**God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.<sup>8</sup>**

Things happen that make us ask questions. When you are reminded about the frailty of life, Lewis says it's as if God is bellowing for your attention. Do you have the answers?

### **An alternative**

You may already think you have the answers. Many people do. What is life about? Let me give you one popular idea. It might be an approach to life you have adopted.

Humanism. Modern day humanism is about finding meaning for life without reference to God. Stephen Fry, a well-known celebrity has narrated a video for the British Humanist Association called, *How Can I Be Happy?* He describes how all of us need to find our own meaning. He says:

**It may be walking in the woods, and caring for...grandchildren, or cooking, watching soap operas, and savouring a favourite wine or a new food.**

He finishes with this:

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<sup>8</sup> C.S.Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Fount Paperbacks, 1977

**The time to be happy is now, and the way to find meaning in life is to get on and live it as fully and as well as we can.<sup>9</sup>**

It sounds very romantic. Maybe you think it's a good approach – get busy and make the most of life. But the approach has its problems. Life is never that simple. For a start, Stephen Fry's salary can probably access a range of experiences that mine can't. That might make me bitter and jealous. It might make me go through life with a chip on my shoulder.

There are other problems. If your passion is walking in the woods, what happens when injury, ill health or old-age keep you indoors? If what gets you up in the morning is the joy of your family, what happens if a grandchild tragically dies? Do you have the answers then?

Jesus told a story about a rich man who accumulated great wealth. He lived a life without reference to God. Why would he need to? He had everything he needed.

Read what happened:

**And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry."'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Justin Brierkey, *Unbelievable: Why, after ten years of talking with atheists, I'm still a Christian*, SPCK, 2017, p88. See 'How Can I Be Happy? Narrated by Stephen Fry – That's Humanism!': <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvz0mmF6NW4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tvz0mmF6NW4)>

<sup>10</sup> Luke 12:16-20

When times are good, we don't ask questions. It's when things get bad, we need the answers. The rich man in Jesus' parable is called a fool. He prepared barns for his riches, but did not prepare his soul for death. C.S.Lewis writes:

**Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well with us. We 'have all we want' is a terrible saying when 'all' does not include God.<sup>11</sup>**

### **Do you have the answers?**

It's important to have the answers. Sometimes things happen that jolt us into asking questions. At other times, things seem to be going just great – we feel like the rich man and we sit back and relax. It's then, we snuggle deep down into the rabbit's white fur.

But Jesus says, the time to ask questions is now. Will you be brave and explore some questions with me?

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, p76