**Jesus: Truth or Fiction?**

“What is truth?” Pilate asked. (John 18:38)

This question from Pontius Pilate has echoed down through the last 2000 years. Generations have asked, especially in relation to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Over this term, Year 10 has been examining the claim of Christianity that Jesus did rise from the dead by investigating the alternate theories to the resurrection. These theories cover many alternatives, suggesting that Jesus was legend, he didn’t die, his body was stolen, or the disciples were hallucinating. Let’s have a quick look at each of these.

The theory that Jesus was legend is based on supposed similarities between Jesus and the gods of other cultures, dating as far back as ancient Egypt. The claims are that Jesus shares a birthday, a virgin mother, 12 disciples, crucifixion, and resurrection with these gods. Another claim suggests that the story of Jesus is astrological, coming from the movement of the stars from December through to April. This theory is disputed on many fronts. First, we know that Jesus was not born on December 25th; this is just the day that Christianity has chosen to celebrate it. This is no different to us celebrating the Queen’s birthday in June when her birthday is in February. Second, Jewish and Roman historians have recorded details of Jesus’ life, and we know that neither the Jews nor the Romans had any desire to promote Jesus. Professional historians have examined these accounts, along with the Biblical record, (which they treat as history), and archaeological evidence to come to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth did exist in the region and at the time that the Bible claims. Interestingly, Judaism and Islam both accept the existence of Jesus. They don’t agree with Christianity about his divinity but they do revere him as a prophet of God.

The ‘Swoon Theory’ makes the claim that Jesus didn’t die, instead he passed out on the cross, or swooned, was placed in the tomb, and later revived. This theory developed in the 19th century and has been popularised by some sections of Islam. These claims are hard to accept when we consider the brutality of Roman crucifixion. Those who were crucified were first scourged with whips that were embedded with sharp stones and metal. They were designed to tear open the flesh. The act of crucifixion caused extreme pain with one’s entire weight supported on three nails that pierced the flesh. Again we have reliable historical evidence of Jesus’ death but this time we can add modern medical evidence to the debate. The reports of blood and water flowing from Jesus’ side after he was pierced by a spear have convinced medical experts that he was dead.

Reports that Jesus’ body was stolen began on resurrection day. The seeds were planted by the chief priests when they went to Pilate asking for a guard to be placed on the tomb. Their concern was their recollection that Jesus had said that he would rise again and they thought that the disciples would steal the body so that these words would be fulfilled. Matthew’s gospel records the guards telling the chief priests that Jesus had risen and the chief priests paying them to say that the body was stolen. We also read of the surprise and doubt of the disciples when they were told that he was risen. They did not expect this. Having witnessed the resurrection the disciples went on to proclaim this good news throughout the region. They were persecuted for their faith and all suffered horrible deaths at different times and in different places. It is inconceivable that they would be willing to die for their faith if they knew that it was based on a lie - what did they have to gain by this? Other possibilities have been proposed including the Romans, Jews or grave robbers stealing the body. When the possible motives and outcomes are examined for each of these we discover that they do not make sense. Another argument against this theory is that the first eye witnesses were women. Ancient societies did not regard the testimony of women as valid. The Greek philosopher Celsus argued against Christianity on this basis, declaring that women could not be believed because they were hysterical. Finally, we have reliable reports of over 500 witnesses who saw Jesus after his resurrection. Surely they could not have seen him if he wasn’t alive!

We all know that we don’t always see things as they really are. Pain, grief, dehydration, drugs, heat, and exposure can all lead to us experiencing hallucinations. It has been suggested that the disciples were hallucinating in their grief and saw what they wanted to see. This theory ignores an important characteristic of hallucinations; it is individuals who hallucinate, not groups of people. The eyewitnesses saw Jesus at different times and in different places over 40 days. They could not all have been hallucinating.

With the alternate theories to the resurrection all having gaping holes in them we only have one alternative left; Jesus was a real person who lived, was crucified, died and was miraculously resurrected. With this being true we are then challenged to accept Jesus’ other claim - that he is the Son of God and the one who provides a way for us to be in relationship with God. This is the truth. It is a truth that we can’t ignore. It is a truth that demands a response. We either accept Jesus for who he is and choose to follow him or we reject him. One thing we cannot do is deny that he existed, died, and was brought back to life.

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” - Jesus (John 18:37, NRSV)

**The Reverend Tony Card**

“These theories cover many alternatives, suggesting that Jesus was legend, he didn’t die, his body was stolen, or the disciples were hallucinating.”