

John Docherty, March 27, 2016 (Easter)

“I love to tell the story ...”

For the last few weeks I've been knocking around ideas in my head regarding how to approach an Easter message this year.

It's an old story; one we tell ourselves every year, and one we've told ourselves every year for the last two thousand years. Granted, *we* haven't heard it every year for the last two thousand years – at best, some of us might have heard it every year for the last 70 or 80 years. But that's still a fair bit of repetition.

How do you tell that story in a way that's fresh; inspiring?

Well, one approach would be to simply retell the story, remembering that it's not an old story to the youngest members of our circle.

It's not an old story to someone who's just come to faith.

And it's not an old story to someone who loves to hear a good story over and over again.

And it *is* a good story. If we extend the story from Easter morning to encompass the entirety of Jesus' life, it's got all the elements of a great human drama: a biography of a larger-than-life character, with subtexts of loyalty and betrayal; love and hate; innocence and conspiracy.

It's got scenes of birth and death; courage and fear; illness and healing; compassion and torture.

It's an epic tale that pits the common man in the person of a simple carpenter's son against powerful religious institutions; against the customs and mores of the time; against local leaders and authorities; that pits one man and his ideas against an entire empire.

And beyond all of that, it's got elements of the supernatural – it's got it all! : stars in the sky pointing the way to a child in a stable; miraculous healings; walking on water; transfigurations; angels; risings from the dead.

It's an amazing story.

But what if it's just *that* : what if it's just a story?

What if the main character, Jesus, never even existed in the first place?

That's the premise of an article in the most recent issue of Maclean's magazine. As we were leaving the House of Friendship on Friday night, following the Good Friday service, I picked up this copy of the magazine on the table at the top of the stairs.

The cover picture and it's title caught my eye : “Did Jesus really exist?”

The article in question examines the research around memory, and is a bit of a comparative review of a work by a religious studies professor by the name of Bart Ehrman, and an historian by the name of Richard Carrier.

Ehrman's work is entitled “Jesus before the Gospels: How the earliest Christians remembered, changed, and invented their stories of the Savior”.

Carrier's work is entitled “On the historicity of Jesus: Why we might have reason for doubt”.

I've not read either of these works, so I can't speak directly to their value or content; I only have this article to go on, along with a bit of Wikipedia-like research. But the main thrust seems to be simply that what we have in the way of written records of the life of Jesus are suspect at best, and outright fiction at worst.

The search for the “historical” Jesus is not a new one. It's an old attempt to filter out the truth of Jesus' life from the possible or presumed textual embellishments and faulty historical records. The idea is to strip away the theological overlays to find the man behind them.

The two works quoted in this article take the exercise a step further.

Ehrman's work on memory, and its general unreliability, apparently drives him to conclude that much, if not most, of what we have in the New Testament gospels is an amalgam of foggy first-person memories written down decades after the fact, second-hand rumour, and collective memory fusion where details from one person's memory of an event are integrated into another's memory of an event – in other

words, a process of creating false memories. Ehrman doesn't discount the existence of an historical Jesus, he just doesn't think he has much to do with what the gospels say about him.

Carrier's work apparently argues that there is little, or no, solid historical evidence for the existence of Jesus at all. He argues that there is basically no non-biblical reference to Jesus, and that what few references *do* exist are forgeries. In other words, other than the gospel narratives, nobody even mentions Jesus, therefore there is no proof that Jesus existed, if he is right that other references are unreliable.

What do you do with that?

What do you do with a body of evidence that undermines the very foundations of your religion, and argues that not only did Jesus not rise from the dead on Easter morning, but he never lived in the first place?

Well, one way of responding to that is to note that the arguments against Jesus' existence are not really based on evidence at all, but on theories and piecemeal historical reconstructions, themselves based on certain presuppositions, one of them being that the gospel narratives are unreliable precisely because they are based on personal memories of eye-witnesses with a particular bias with regard to their story.

But surely by that measure, every history we have is then equally unreliable because it is a record of what has happened, as recorded by someone with a particular perspective on the event.

And, frankly, I'm willing to admit that to be the case. I have no problem accepting that a history of the exploits of Genghis Khan as written by a contemporary may have its share of embellishments and half-truths, but I don't because of that conclude that Genghis Khan didn't exist.

I have no problem accepting that a history of the second world war may have the bias of a victor or a loser running through its thread, but I don't because of that conclude that the second world war never happened. I may allow for the fact that the accounts of atrocities committed on either side could contain fictionalized distortions born of some kind of need for self-justification or denial, but I would tend to expect that the distortions had some basis in fact all the same.

I don't for a minute buy the argument that Jesus couldn't have been a living, breathing, historical figure, if for no other reason than the fact that I see no reason

to allow the opinion of two writers, who have their own vested interests in publishing material that will sell, and whose work is then written up in a magazine for an article to appear the week before Easter, to upend two thousand years of tradition and belief.

But, in fairness, let's look at this possibility.

What *if* Jesus didn't exist? What if the gospels *really are* a collection of half-truths and false memories shrouded in legend and myth?

What would that mean for Christianity?

If Jesus never lived, and therefore never died and rose again, I think it's fair to say that it would be a near death knell for the theological underpinnings of Christianity.

Certainly that part of Christian theology that requires this particular man, Jesus, to die on the cross for the redemption of sins would be lost.

That part of Christian theology that then requires this particular man, Jesus, to rise from the dead in order to be the first-fruits of eternal life would also be lost.

But I say it would be a *near* death knell for Christianity, rather than an absolute death knell, because I frankly believe that if it *were* proved, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Jesus the carpenter's son never walked this earth, we would respond by saying something like : “then it must have been someone else”.

We may have gotten the names and dates wrong, but there is Truth (with a capital T) in this story, and we're not prepared to abandon it because the details have been distorted along the way.

The One who lived, died, and rose again may have been called Jesus, or Osiris, or Krishna, or George ... we don't know ... but we do know in our heart of hearts that this story is reliable.

It may not be reliable in the historical, factual sense, but it is reliable in the sense that it gives our lives meaning; it provides us with guidance; it brings light to an otherwise murky existence; and it embodies the best of our aspirations for a way through this life.

At its worst, this story paints a picture of an idealized, largely fictional, hero.

At its best, this story offers us hope.

At its *very* best, it is the story of Jesus of Nazareth : a simple carpenter's son who walked, and talked, and lived, and died, and rose again.

Was Jesus' genealogy the one we find in Mark or the one we find in Luke (they *are* different)? I don't know.

In the last week of Jesus' life, did the fig tree he cursed wither and die immediately, as we read in Matthew, or did it die and wither unnoticed until the following morning as we read in Mark? I don't know.

Did Jesus chase the moneylenders from the temple before he cursed the fig tree, as we read in Matthew, or did he chase them from the temple after cursing the fig tree, as we read in Mark? I don't know.

When the women came to Jesus' tomb to properly prepare his body for burial, was there one “young man” dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, as per Mark, or were there two men “in dazzling apparel” as per Luke? I don't know.

Does it matter?

I suppose it does if one holds to an absolutely literal reading of scripture that needs to be absolutely coherent in every respect.

I suppose it does if this kind of inconsistency is taken to be proof that the events simply couldn't have happened at all.

I suppose it matters.

And yet ... it doesn't matter so much to me.

I can live with these kinds of inconsistencies.

I can live with a description of events that varies according to the teller.

I can live with perception colouring the telling of the tale.

I can accept that where I might see Jesus bringing wholeness to a man beset by mental illness, others of the day might see Jesus bringing wholeness to a man beset by demons.

I can accept that the core of Jesus' message is meaningful to me, whether he said it quite the way the evangelists captured it; or whether someone has enhanced the telling along the way; or whether what was attributed to Jesus was a compilation of common proverbs and stories of incredible acts.

I guess what I'm saying is that I take this picture of Jesus on faith.

I trust the 'gist' of this picture.

If pushed, I suppose I might confess that I *choose* to believe this picture is true, because it resonates on some level with me, and it's given meaning and structure to my life.

I choose to believe it, because I need a walking, talking, human Jesus to believe in. That very real humanity is central for me. If you've been paying attention to my meditations at all over the last couple of years, you've probably picked up on how important Jesus' humanity is to me.

A mythical saviour figure lost in the mists of time just doesn't inspire me the way this man who sweat blood at Gethsemane does.

It doesn't humble me the way this man does when he tells his disciples that “no greater love has anyone than this, to lay down his life for his friends.”

A mythical Christ doesn't stir in me the kinds of emotions that this man from Galilee does when he asks a naked, homeless man who has been abandoned by his family and neighbours, and who is struggling with his own demons, “What is your name?”

A fictional Christ doesn't move me the way the man on the cross does when he cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I *choose* to believe and follow this historical Jesus.

Does that mean that *you* have to believe in him?

Well, that's the big question, isn't it.

Do you need to believe that Jesus walked, and talked, and lived among us?

Do you need to believe that One named Jesus died on a cross in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, then rose again on this Sunday morning we call Easter?

Well, if you want to call yourself a Christian, I suppose you do.

You need to be able to recite the Apostles' Creed with some level of integrity, even if you've never learned it, or even heard of it, or have questions about how it all works. Please note that the Apostles' Creed says nothing about a future Heaven or Hell, but limits itself to what are considered the essentials of the Christian faith, common to most of Christianity. As much as I like our confession of faith as a work in progress, and am a bit suspicious of creeds that carve things in stone, I find the Apostles' Creed even simpler and more accessible than our confession of faith :

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.