

God and Film

Michaelmas Term, 2015

11th October, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Star Wars

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Rev Dr Simon Perry

Star Wars

11th October 2015

A long time ago in a Galaxy far, far away, everybody spoke English. And not only English, but one in which the heroic rebels speak with American accents, and the nasty evil leaders of the Empire speak with English accents. The original Star Wars movies of the 70s and 80s were part of a once strong tradition in which movies – consciously or otherwise – re-narrated the American story in which rebels are good Americans and baddies are English imperialists.

And that story goes something like this: Empires are evil – made up of big, nasty, ancient powers bent on exploitation, oppression, and greed. The birth of the United States itself, of course, was a radical act of defiance against the British Empire. So the story goes. And if there is one thing the USA is not, then it is first and foremost, most definitely NOT an empire. Empires are evil and violent, and what happens if one morning, the British monarch decides to send musket-carrying red coats across the Atlantic to inflict further evil and violence upon the rebellious colonials? Right up to today, U.S. citizens retain the right to bear arms – to buy automatic weapons over the counter, in order to prevent any further exposure to evil and violence. You never know when the Queen might choose to re-invade.

Star Wars is the story of empire and rebels (who are definitely the goodies) or terrorists (we would call them today.) The Star Wars movies are clearly the most influential science fiction franchise in the history of our galaxy. There have been three trilogies: beginning with episodes 4, 5 and 6 in the 1970s, followed by episodes 1, 2 and 3 in 1999, and episode 7 appearing at the end of this term. This evening, I have in mind only the original three, largely because the second trilogy sounds like a scaffolder's medical description of digestive complaints: The Phantom Menace; Attack of the Clones; Revenge of the Sith! So much for the prequels. They were successful movies but did not have the iconic appeal of the originals, because of the lack of narrative. This evening the focus will remain on Luke Skywalker from the original movies.

The basic story goes like this – Luke Skywalker's family is killed, he leaves home, learns the ways of the 'force', uses a little fighter to blow up a moon-sized space station. His mentor, Sir Alec Guinness tries to teach him to be a Jedi knight – but due to family problems, he never graduates from Jedi school. His nemesis Darth Vader also happens to be his dad, his love interest also turns out to be his sister, Luke refuses to join the dark side – and the empire is destroyed. The end.

The success of the Star Wars franchise, however, is not simply a crude anti-imperialist metaphor. The narrative substructure is based upon the research by the celebrated guru of cultural mythologies, Joseph Campbell. Campbell wrote a brilliantly simplistic masterpiece, entitled, *The Hero with a thousand faces*, in which he studied the mythologies of cultures throughout world history – and identified a basic framework that underlies every hero-story in every single human religious culture. From Moses to Mills and Boon, from Hare Krishna to Harry Potter, from Eastern and Western and Aboriginal cultures – Campbell distilled a basic storyline common to all humanity.

Naturally, Joseph Campbell's work was snubbed by most academics, because although he had some great insights, Campbell seemed to have reduced the individuality of all the diverse and varied cultural and religious stories of the world into a single, simplistic, predictable plot. The hero faces adversity, finds a mentor, summons up the courage to face his demons (yes, his demons), engages in a struggle, overcomes, and of course returns home – just in time for tea and medals. But whatever we want to say about the Star Wars story line, it does seem fair that at the very least,

Campbell had noted a common strand running through the story lines of multiple cultures: the pagan myth that sees good overcome evil.

So it's hardly surprising that many Christian fans of Star Wars have found it bursting with biblical metaphor – and regarded Luke Skywalker as a kind of Christ figure. Are they right? That's a tough question, so like any conscientious preacher, I consulted Google, where the answer was a resounding yes! And here is the proof: Luke Skywalker's surname translates into 'heavenly light traveller;' Luke's first name – well, the Gospel of Luke; Luke's battle against the fallen Jedi, Darth Vader is a metaphor for Jesus's battle with the fallen angel Lucifer; In prayer, 'the Lord speaketh unto thee with a voice likened to Sir Alec Guinness, the devil tempteth thee through the vocal chords of James Earl Jones.' and if that wasn't turgid enough, it all goes down hill from there.

The question I want to ask quite simply is whether the biblical portrait of a Christ fits into the framework identified in Star Wars. Since this is a movie which both endorses and promotes the overriding cultural virtue of being a rebel, being anti-imperial, finding your courage and facing impossible odds in your quest to see good prevail over evil. Is that consistent with the Christ of the Gospels? On the surface, that may appear to be the case.

Skywalker is indeed a biblical figure. Everyone expected liberty from the Roman Empire – and a Messiah (or perhaps, a Jedi) is precisely the person who was expected to deliver that. A Messiah would be expected to March on Jerusalem with rebel forces, (just as the rebel forces attacked the Death Star). With the backing of Yahweh, rebels would defeat Pontius Pilate (just as the rebel forces would defeat Darth Vader). Such a display of power and might, would ensure that the whole world would marvel at the glory of Israel. If you doubt this – those of you in the choir who sing the Magnificat every week – look at it again, it is an appeal to Yahweh for a powerful messiah figure to overthrow of an unjust imperial regime. And everyone expected Jesus to fulfil that role. That, after all, is what a Messiah is supposed to do – to bring liberty from oppressors.

So what happens when the Messiah marches into Jerusalem? People lined the streets shouting Hosannah – the cry for liberation. They wave palm branches, just as the citizens of Baghdad waved palm branches when the Americans arrived in 2003. The people of Jerusalem want liberation from the empire. So when he enters the city, does Jesus storm the Roman Garrison and overthrow the pagans? No he storms into the temple and overthrows the tables. Does he support the rebel cause? No – he says, 'My father's house will be a house of prayer for all nations... but you have turned it into a den of robbers? No – the word he uses for robbers actually refers more truly to – rebels, or bandits, or resistance fighters, to terrorists even. The contemporary historian Josephus tells us that the Jewish resistance movement stored its armoury in the temple because it was the only place the Romans were not allowed to set foot. Jesus says, that this house of prayer for all nations has been turned into a hotbed of rebellion, soiled by hopes of a violent, nationalist resistance.

Jesus's actions in the temple had sealed his fate. Everyone, it seems, wants Joseph Campbell's narrative, they want the Star Wars ending. And the story of the Gospel offers a sharp alternative. Jesus was not the Messiah people expected. He was not the Luke Skywalker figure. And the people turned against him, in favour of someone who HAD tried to instigate a rebellion, an uprising: Barabbas was not an evil thief: again, he was a rebel, a freedom fighter, a terrorist, a bandit. That is the kind of leader the people wanted – one who would give up his life to fight against the empire. And that is why they called for his release. Not because they were evil people – telling Pontius Pilate that you want a rebel released from his custody was a dangerous and courageous move. The crowds calling for the release of Barabbas were living the Star Wars narrative.

And Jesus was crucified in his place. It is a spanner in the works of the grand narratives of the world. It creates confusion in the pagan dream for a happy ending. It does not follow the plot line of these stories with universal appeal. This is a story that ends in defeat, and confusion. And though the resurrection might look like a happy twist, added to provide the need for a happy ending – in reality, resurrection is a traumatic, painful, disorienting experience.

The refusal of Jesus to resist the empire, does not make him complicit in imperial power. The whole point of the Gospels, properly read – and of the resurrection, properly understood, is that those seeking violent solutions, to violent problems can never escape the cycle of violence. An alternative dynamic animates the Gospel story – one in which power is not coercive, where evil enemies are not destroyed with swords, or guns, or even an elegant weapon from a more civilised age.

The liberation sought and found in the New Testament is not simply spiritualised away from politics, or postponed until the afterlife, or made to conform with the pagan mythologies of the world at large. The liberation effected by the Christ of the gospels, is one that has real effects on real people in the real world – and cannot be reduced to tidy storylines, or soundbites, or even creeds. In fact, there was no literary genre, no narrative, no plot that could accommodate what witnesses had seen in Jesus of Nazareth – which is why first year theology undergraduates here face a constant struggle to describe to examiners precisely what a Gospel is.

Whatever the answer – it defies the universal mythology identified by Joseph Campbell, and it subverts the myth of redemptive violence affirmed by the Star Wars franchise. Yes - that Gospel does contain a hero, an exemplar, a Luke Skywalker figure – and his name is Barabbas.

Rev Dr Christopher J. Ellis

Living Gratefully

Founder's Commemoration Service 1.11.15

Psalm 103

1 Thess 5.14-24

A man goes to the holy man and complains, "Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?"

He is told, "Take your goat into the room with you." The man is incredulous, but the holy man insists. "Do as I say and come back in a week."

A week later the man comes back looking more distraught than before. "We cannot stand it," he tells the holy man, "The goat is filthy."

The holy man then tells him, "Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week."

A radiant man returns a week later, exclaiming, "Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat - only the nine of us."

A theme running through this service is thanksgiving or thankfulness. We have already commemorated the benefactions and the generosity which founded the college and have brought to mind the contributions of so many people along the way. If you have read ahead, or know the script from last year, you will know that there are prayers of thanksgiving still to come. And we have just heard scripture read - and then announced 'Thanks be to God'.

Many of us were taught as children not to forget our 'pleases' and 'thank yous' and I still find myself responding to hospitality with the early-taught 'Thank you for having me.'

We have listened to a psalm which is an outpouring of thanksgiving and praise to God - 'Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless his holy name.' And if it didn't pass us by in the flurry of apostolic advice, we might have spotted St Paul's puzzling exhortation 'give thanks in all circumstances'!

Of course, this may be wisdom you have already taken on board – or you might have long ago decided that it is a redundant piece of naïve piety unsuited to a world in which justice needs to be striven for and in which there is much to complain about.

However my contention this evening - and there is not in my judgement much point agreeing to preach and struggle with scripture unless some contending goes on – it is my contention this evening that thankfulness is a key element of what it means to fulfil our humanity and, even more contentiously, that thankfulness is a fundamental way of knowing God.

I used to struggle with Paul's words. As a young local minister (and as a bolshie Welshman to boot) I railed against injustice and found it hard to make sense of Paul's words, 'give thanks in all circumstances'. The only conclusion I could come to was that some supreme act of will was required on my part to say 'thank you' to God - DESPITE what was happening around me and sometimes to me. Yet this somehow seemed at best hypocritical and at worst impossible – saying 'thank you' through gritted teeth!

And then in my early forties I was given, out of the blue, a diagnosis of cancer and a period of time when I didn't know how long I might live – with four growing children I wondered whether I would ever see them grow up, let alone their children!

Through, I would say, the grace of God and the skill of the surgeon and his team I survived. At first, it was to return home from hospital and then to return to work and then to see the fullness of years pass by with opportunities for service and celebration. In my journal at the time I wrote, 'I am being tempered on the anvil of God's love' - and it certainly felt as though I was between a hammer and a hard place, though I somehow sensed that good was coming out of this hardness – good was being worked in me through it all. I also wrote 'I believe that in this I am being held by God's love - but God's love has rough hands!'

And I began to see that it was not a matter of gritted teeth, but of seeing in all things the givenness and graciousness of life. Not for a moment did I think that God had sent the cancer, but somehow his Plan B (officially known as 'redemption') brought out of my personal tribulation far more good than if the tribulation had not occurred. Thus I could give thanks in the most challenging of circumstances. Well, not the most challenging, for after all I survived – yet in such a way that I learned that if I had not survived I would have still been taken to a new place in which there was a world made new. As Maya Angelou put it, 'This is a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before.'

After over forty years in pastoral ministry, being alongside people in all kinds of ordinary and extreme situations, I have learned that you cannot take people's responses to hardship for granted. Tough times can make you bitter and twisted or can refine your humanity into pure gold. We are all work in progress, but we get to choose whether we will repay evil for evil or whether we will live lives of forgiveness and gratitude.

Perhaps we should speak not so much of 'being human' as 'becoming human' – that how we respond to situations and circumstances form part of a journey – a journey of becoming more who we are called to be.

There is plenty of historic wisdom to guide us. Cicero commented that 'a thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues.' And Shakespeare offered plenty of warnings about ingratitude.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition there is much emphasis on this theme. In Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Hebrew slaves, escaping from Egypt, stand on the brink of the promised land and are warned;

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them... do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the strength to get wealth. (Deuteronomy 8.12, 17-18)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930s and 40s, reflected, 'In ordinary life, we can hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.' In a Nazi prison cell on New Year's Day 1945, he wrote a poem which looked with faith towards an uncertain future, a future which, in the event, was to end with a hangman's noose a few months later. In Fred Pratt Green's hymn translation of that poem we read, or sing:

And when the cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it gladly, trusting though with trembling,
out of so good and so beloved a hand.

Within Christian believing there is an integrated connection between living thankfully and the Christian believer's desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, patterning their life after his – for lives of thankfulness blossom into lives of generosity. And the apostle Paul crowns an extended exhortation on generosity and sharing, by characterizing Jesus as God's 'indescribable gift'.

Becoming thankful and generous human beings is also a way of coming to know something of the true nature of God – the generous, creative, life-giving, gratuitously gracious God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ. Or perhaps we should say that the more we acknowledge the generous love of God in heartfelt prayers of thanksgiving, the greater becomes our capacity to be trusting and generous.

Just as the concert pianist still needs to practice scales, so our repeated discipline of offering prayers of thanksgiving makes us fit for living generous lives in which we honour others and share and celebrate the goodness of God. The prayers of thanksgiving in worship became a kind of rehearsal in which we practise how to live.

As a Christian minister, I have frequently repeated the words of Jesus during the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. I continue to be moved by the reflection that Jesus in the upper room, the night before he was crucified, not only took bread and wine and indicated to his disciples that these elements in some way represented his body and blood, soon to be broken and shed - but then, with their meaning linking to his impending suffering and death, he took the bread and the wine and gave thanks for them. Not only that, but he said 'Do this in memory of me' and each time a group of his followers take bread and wine in this way they are opening themselves to being shaped and formed into his likeness – a likeness of sacrificial love and thanksgiving.

So giving thanks in all circumstances becomes a discipline of Christian formation, a way of entering into some awareness of the nature of God. To experience and celebrate life as gift can lead us in a small step to seeking the Giver.

I have learned that there are different ways of knowing. There is the knowledge that comes from books and the knowledge that comes from experiment - in laboratory and life. There is the knowledge that comes from meeting people and listening to their stories, weeping and laughing with them. There is the knowledge that comes with loving and being loved...and then there is the knowledge which comes from knowing that you don't know and that you can't know – or rather that you can only know in certain ways.

Approaching life with thankfulness leads us to a way of knowing God that is congruent with who God is and what God is like. Thankfulness recognizes generosity, and engenders trust. It recognizes faithfulness and leads to a way of knowing which is from the heart, that is the whole person. This is why Brother David Steindl-Rast claims that 'Gratefulness is the heart of prayer and an approach to life in its fullness.'

This isn't naïve piety, or even hypocritical politeness. Rather, it is a different way of knowing God, a practical way of knowing – not so much cognitive or intellectual knowledge, as the kind of knowing that someone who is loved knows.

In the climax to his Divine Comedy, Dante realizes that he can never understand the how of Jesus Christ revealing both divinity and humanity, but he somehow grasps intuitively that his soul can be aligned with God's love. He writes,

But already my desire and my will were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed, by the Love which moves the sun and the stars.

This is the work of thankfulness – a grasping of the generosity and faithfulness of God, of our being shaped into a full humanity measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ.

Bless the Lord O my soul,

and all that is within me,

bles his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and forget none of his benefits...

Bless the Lord, all his works,

in all paces of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Prof. Morna D. Hooker

Life of Brian

15th November 2015

Monty Python's *Life of Brian* was first screened back in 1979, long before most of you were born. Anyone attending an address about it in a church or chapel at that time would undoubtedly have expected to hear a denunciation of a film which was widely regarded as blasphemous. On November 9th that year, a notorious television debate took place between John Cleese and Michael Palin on the one side and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge and Mervyn Stockwood, Bishop of Southwark, on the other, and led to Malcolm Muggeridge describing it as a 'miserable little film' which would soon be forgotten, since it was only 'tenth rate'. Astonishingly, it seems that today you have all heard of the film, even if you have never seen it, and know that Brian was not the Messiah, but simply 'a very naughty boy', who was under the delusion that Jesus had pronounced a blessing on the cheese-makers. Even more astonishingly, an academic conference on *The Life of Brian* was held at King's College London last year, at which one participant described the film as 'a tribute to the life, work and teaching of Jesus'. John Cleese, who was present, was very chuffed! Blasphemy or tribute? A 'squalid little film' or one deserving the attention of scholars researching the life of Jesus 35 years after it appeared? As usual, I suspect that the truth lies somewhere in-between.

A great deal of the opposition to the film lay in the supposition that it was a parody of the life of Jesus. The Pythons denied this, and it seems nearer the mark to say that it is a parody of the many biblical epics which appeared at this time. The crucified rebels' chorus of 'I'm Brian' even echoes a scene in *Spartacus*. Brian is not Jesus, though he can be seen as Jesus' alter ego, which is why the film invites us to reflect on the tradition about Jesus in new ways. Indeed, in that TV debate, Michael Pailin says that they rejected the idea of doing a 'Life of Jesus', because the more they researched the topic, the more they realized that there was very little to ridicule in the life of Jesus himself. For the Pythons, the film was a parody of contemporary British life, which is perhaps why the central character has the strangely unJewish name of 'Brian' – even though they say they chose it because people called 'Brian' tended to be somewhat slow to catch on! The centurion who demands that Brian writes out *Romani ite Domum*, the correct Latin version of 'Romans go home', a hundred times over, and who ticks the names of the rebels on his list, inviting them to take 'one cross each', and who asks them not to let the side down as they march to execution, is a parody of the public school master – an institution clearly loathed by John Cleese who, in that television debate, protested about the chapel services he had been made to attend at school, services which made him wonder why he was being forced to listen to this 'rubbish'. It emerged, in discussion, that some of the sermons he endured had been preached by Mervyn Stockwood! But it was not Christianity itself that the Pythons were attacking – rather the form of Christianity that insulted their intelligence. Indeed, the film was not really about religion at all, they said, but was an allegory about suburban England, its class system and public schools, its bureaucracy, nationalism and imperialism. In lampooning the characters in the story, the film followed in the tradition of the mediaeval mystery plays, which lampooned contemporary clerics and rulers in the guise of biblical characters.

At the same time, however, the film-makers recognized that Jesus had to be seen in the context of his time – and so the context that Brian, his contemporary, inhabits conveys brilliantly the tensions of first-century Palestine. First of all, we are made aware of the reality of the brutality of the Roman occupation. 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' ask the rebels. The answer, of course, was 'a great deal': communications, roads, sanitation, an excellent water supply – and yet they were ruthless in controlling their subjects. To the Jews, they represented not just an alien force, but the enemies of God, who must be driven from the land.

The bizarre portrayal of rival groups of rebels who concocted absurd plans to oust the Romans – plans which came to nothing because they couldn't agree among themselves – reminds us that there were in fact many such rival groups. The film-makers did their homework – and for that reason, one needs to know a little about conditions in

first-century Palestine, as well as the life of Jesus, in order fully to appreciate the film. The antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, for example, is reflected in one rebel's protest that he was being crucified next to a Samaritan! There should be separate sections for Jews and Samaritans, he insists. The way in which the poetic images used by apocalyptic visionaries, who spoke of the sun and moon falling from heaven, were frequently understood literally is mocked in the pathetic ramblings of prophets describing how in those last days everything will go astray. What, for example? Well, hammers, and other things.

Of Jesus himself, we catch only glimpses in the film. In the opening scene, the wise men follow a mysteriously moving star, but find themselves in the wrong cave at the wrong manger, before discovering the right child, and reclaiming their gifts to deliver them to Jesus. As with the Gospels, we move quickly forward, and find ourselves present when Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount. On the outskirts of the crowd, it is difficult to hear what he is saying, but a bystander assures us that it is 'Blessed are the cheese-makers', reminding us how difficult it is to 'hear' – that is to understand – Jesus' words, twenty centuries later. Why should cheese-makers, in particular, be blessed, we wonder, and are assured that the words are not to be taken literally, but apply to all manufacturers of dairy products; to me, as a biblical scholar, this remark reminds me uncomfortably of the kind of unhelpful comment made all too often in biblical commentaries. As for misunderstanding Jesus' words, we hardly need reminding, this weekend, in the light of events in Paris, of the way in which those with closed minds can 'mishear' words of scripture, whether recorded in the Bible or in the Koran.

Elsewhere, the story of Jesus lies in the background of the film, even though he is not mentioned. In the story of someone being stoned for blasphemy, for example, where it is the hypocrite who denounces him who is himself felled by a huge stone. There are echoes here of Jesus' denunciation both of stoning and of hypocrites. The only reason given for the stoning is 'because it is written, that's why', reminding us that first-century Jewish life was governed by the scriptures.

Brian turns out to be the son of a Roman centurion, reminding us of the accusations surrounding Jesus' birth, recorded in non-biblical Jewish sources.

An echo of the Gospel story comes in the question thrown at Brian's mother:

'Are you a virgin?' When Brian denies that he is the Messiah, a member of the crowd points out that the true Messiah is the one person who is bound to deny his own messiahship – and we remember that it is this which seems to explain Jesus' own silence in the Gospels. In the Gospels, too, Jesus' own family – including his mother – fail to recognize him, and think that he is out of his mind. So it is here, with Brian: in one of the most famous lines of the film, his mother declares: 'he's not the Messiah; he's a very naughty boy'. The crowds, convinced that Brian is indeed the Messiah, flock to hear him, and he cannot shake them off, however much he tries – another parallel to the story of Jesus. Though no great preacher, Brian's words feebly echo Jesus' teaching about not judging others, and relying on God to meet one's need. The crowd follows him into the wilderness, determined to make him their leader, and hail him as the Messiah; hungry, they demand food, and attempt to satisfy their hunger with juniper berries. Once again, you need to know the Gospel stories of the feeding of the crowd to appreciate the story here.

It is in the reaction of the crowd to Brian that we see what the Pythons apparently regarded as the central message of the film. It was, as John Cleese insisted in that television debate, that you must think for yourselves. 'You're all individuals,' Brian tells the crowd, and with one voice they chant 'Yes, we are all individuals'. 'You're all different,' he tells them, and again they echo his words. Belief is not something that should be imposed upon people, but something they come to for themselves. It is not Christianity per se that is being attacked, but a Christianity that is

imposed, and that is accepted without question. Perhaps the critics of the film should have learned that lesson and thought about it for themselves, rather than simply echoing the condemnations of others.

It is undoubtedly true that the scenes which gave the greatest offence to Christians were the final ones, in which Brian is marched out to be executed and

is crucified. Many saw this as a mockery of Jesus' own crucifixion, and so as an attack on the most deeply-held convictions of Christian believers. The final scene, in which the crucified rebels join in a chorus of 'Always look on the bright side of life', is a long way from the tradition of Christ, dying in agony, naked, isolated and shamed, apparently defeated by the powers of evil. Muggerridge claimed that it made Jesus into a clown. The voice-over, telling us that records of the song are available for purchase in the foyer after the show, reminds us of the musicals popular at the time, Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell among them.

Far from the traditional portrayal of the dying Jesus it may be, yet here too there are echoes of the Gospel story: the man who helps someone carry his cross; the failure of Brian's so-called friends to stand by him; the release of another prisoner instead of Brian. But there are even closer parallels at a deeper level. Brian is not crucified alone, but among a crowd of common criminals – and far from undermining the significance of the parallel scene in the Gospels, as protestors suggested, the idea that Jesus did not die alone is in fact something which the Gospels emphasize, by showing Jesus crucified between two gangsters. Like Brian, Jesus is put to death alongside his fellow human beings – so encapsulating the Christian doctrine of the incarnation; he was made like us, both in his birth and in his death. He shared our humanity to the full, and ended up on a cross, like so many other first-century Jewish leaders.

What really strikes one, however, watching the final scene of the film, is that none of the victims seems to be suffering pain or humiliation. Rather they are depicted as almost triumphant, defying Rome to the last, singing about the bright side of life. The scene appears unrealistic, the words banal, and the song strikes us as particularly inappropriate at the moment, when our thoughts are focussed, not on a group of crucified terrorists, but on the innocent victims of terrorists in Paris. To speak of death as the 'bright side' of life to their families and friends would certainly be offensive. Nevertheless, that final scene reminded me of another traditional portrayal of Jesus' death – those crucifixes where Jesus is shown, apparently dying in triumph, rather than in agony. Here the cross has become a throne, and Jesus' arms are spread out to embrace the whole of humanity. This is the theme of Christus Victor, an interpretation of the death of Christ which sees it as a triumph and a victory over the powers of evil, rescuing humanity from the grasp of sin and death. It is a theme that is present already in the Gospels; think, for example, of the fact that Mark insists that Jesus is put to death as King, or of John's portrayal of the crucifixion as Jesus' glorification. It is a doctrine that is expounded by later theologians, and by the makers of those powerful Christus Victor crucifixes. If you try to portray these two ideas – of the suffering Christ and the triumphant Christ – in art or film, you get two very different pictures, but each represents an aspect of the truth, and the second of them is echoed here, however inadequately.

The Life of Brian seems, in fact, to stop before it gets to the end of the story – which is presumably our 'hero's' death. The film ends with the chorus of the crucified, and so leaves us wondering why we should look on the bright side of life. What reason has been given for this optimism? None at all. Brian's story, a story of mistakes and absurdities from beginning to end, has ended in total failure. But it reminds us that in that other, parallel story – the life of Jesus – which seemed to many to have ended in total failure. In that story, however, the scene of Jesus' death is not the end, but leads to glory and triumph, and the bright side of life proves to be victory and resurrection.