

WHEN GOD GIVES UP

NO GOD OR KNOW GOD?

I LIKE JESUS... BUT IS HE REAL?

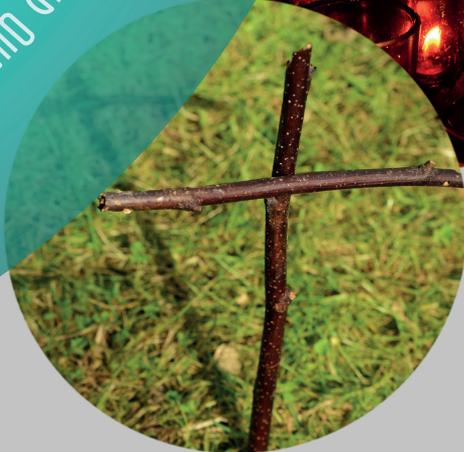
INTERVIEW WITH GEMMA HUNT

LOADED QUESTION

TESTIMONIES

THE PRODIGAL - EDITION 5

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Welcome to The Prodigal

We're excited to share with you this latest edition of Barton Church's magazine which looks to explore, ask questions of and understand more about the Christian faith.



Within these pages you'll find a couple of people telling their stories about the journey they have been on to come to know God, as well as an exclusive interview with children's TV presenter and Kent resident Gemma Hunt, who explains what her faith in God looks like. We ask the question: Jesus Christ – myth or reality? and examine some of the evidence for the fact that Jesus was a real person in history. And you can also find out more about the story in the Bible from which this magazine takes its name.



As a church, we think that it is really important to live out what the apostle Peter says in the Bible: "always be prepared to tell everyone who asks you why you believe as you do." With this in mind, should you come to the end of this magazine and find you have lots of questions, we would love to meet up with you and investigate the evidence, the claims and the validity of Christianity. On the back page, you will find a feedback form you can fill in for us to get in touch with you or we would really welcome you to come and visit us one Sunday. We meet at 10am for coffee and for our morning service at 10.30am at Canterbury College, New Dover Road.



Rose

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No God or Know God?

In my office at work I have a spare broken chair. My colleague and I know that, whenever you sit on it, the chair drops a few centimetres and we are just used to it. However, for the unsuspecting, there is a fraction of a second where instead of feeling a solid support they momentarily fall weightlessly towards the floor. It is by faith, without a thought to test whether the chair will take their weight, that they sit unprepared for our faulty seat!



Faith gets a very poor press in our society. Surely it is the preserve of the fundamentalist and the ignorant, the uneducated and the flighty. However, I think faith is one of the greatest aspects of being human. Without even realising it, we make hundreds of perfectly good decisions every day without direct evidence or specific knowledge to guide us.

Faith is simply acting on something we believe to be true. Curiously, true faith has little to do with how firmly we believe and everything to do what we believe in. It is not our visitor's faith that lets them down but the state of the chair itself. We simply have to work out how trustworthy something is.

Many of these incidental decisions are trivial and we risk little if we get it wrong. But there are matters, vitally important to us, on which we must rely on faith to guide us.

A change of career or a new partner, a new home or the best school for our children. We ask people, we try things out, we get to know a person or

spend time in a place and, as we do this, our faith grows. This 'knowing' is not factual but it is deeply human and it works.

We believe in God in a similar way. He reveals himself in the beauty of creation, through what is written in the Bible and his presence with us day by day. Whilst there is concrete evidence for what Christians believe, we only get to know God first by faith.

Daniel Clarke is married with two children and has been a member at Barton for 17 years. He likes reading, sketching and cycling.

Searching FOR Answers

If you had told me ten years ago that I would become a Christian, I probably would have laughed.

I was raised in a non-Christian home and had only set foot in churches for weddings and funerals. I was an inquisitive child, always asking questions, but I could never find the answers. It wasn't until after graduating from university that I considered exploring Church, in spite of some of the associations I had.

I had a friend attending Barton Church and, having experienced a carol service there, I was intrigued by the sermon and the people that I met.

Until that week I had thought of Jesus Christ as simply an interesting historical figure and moral teacher.

But something I read in CS Lewis' 'Mere Christianity' completely challenged this. Jesus claimed to be the son of God and said that he could give people eternal life; so if these claims weren't true, that would make him mad or evil, not someone who should be teaching us moral lessons! Alternatively, that would make him God. I had to rethink everything I'd assumed about this person.

After months of historical and theological research, I found myself wanting so much to believe the message in front of me and to have the relationship with God that I'd heard was possible.

But I didn't like the idea of no longer being in control of my life, and yet this was the object of my discontent. I prayed out loud for the first time that evening, for courage, guidance and trust, frustrated by my own fears.



When I at last sat at the end of my bed and listened to the silence, I began to realise what had just happened. By praying, and placing my trust in God, I already had the faith I was longing for, and that empty feeling that I had known for so many years had begun to close up. I simultaneously laughed and burst into tears.

Like many people, my journey has taken me through some dark and challenging times but God has given me the strength to continue in my search for him.

I am no longer the fearful person that I once was. I have changed: I know trust and love and that every day matters. **No matter how hard it gets, keep praying, keep fighting. God is listening.**

Cassie has just completed an MA in Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Kent. She is a lover of art, adventures and good red wine!

MERE CHRISTIANITY by CS Lewis © copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd 1942, 1943, 1944, 1952.

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things **JESUS** said would not be a ***GREAT MORAL TEACHER***. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the **Devil of Hell**. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the **Son of God**, or else a **madman** or something worse. You can shut him up for a *fool*, you can spit and kill him as a **demon** or you can fall at his feet and call him **LORD** or **God**, but let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not
”
intend to.

I like Jesus...but is he real?



Last year a major survey conducted by the Evangelical Alliance in the UK found that, when asked, 39% of people weren't sure Jesus ever existed as a real person. They liked what Jesus seemed to represent but thought he was a mythical figure.

Eric Harmer asks the questions: how can we know if Jesus ever did exist? Is he any more real than King Arthur or Robin Hood?

The results of this survey are surprising because there is in fact a large amount of evidence for the existence of Jesus as a historical figure. There are three main reasons virtually all historians, whether or not they believe in God, accept that Jesus was a real person in history.

Firstly, he is mentioned in sources external to the Bible. The three most significant of these are Josephus (a Jewish historian), Tacitus (a Roman historian) and Pliny (a Roman governor). There isn't space here to go into detail about the writings of each of these but all three disliked Christianity intensely – they certainly weren't writing to try and promote stories about Jesus but were simply recording what was going on at the time.

Secondly, there wasn't time for mythical stories about Jesus to develop. The gospels and other early church writings that we find in the Bible about Jesus were written within 20-40 years after his death and during the lifetime of eyewitnesses. If we take King Arthur as an example, it took many centuries for the tales about him to become exaggerated and it isn't until the 12th Century (600 years later) that the story was written down.

Finally, the events of Jesus' life and the nature of his death aren't compatible with what we would expect from a

made up story. In the ancient world crucifixion wasn't just feared because of the agonising pain but also because it was believed to be a sign that you were cursed by God.

If someone was fabricating this story to persuade people that Jesus was a real person, they wouldn't have ended the story with him being crucified – it made no sense and was a major hindrance to people believing in Jesus later on. The Bible itself acknowledges this when the Apostle Paul talks about the story of Jesus on the cross as a “stumbling block” to people believing.

Maybe you've read this far and are thinking “So what? Maybe Jesus was real but what difference does that make to me?”

This is a really important question. Because if Jesus was real then we have to decide what we do with the claims he made. He said he could connect us to God and give us a new start in life. He said he created the world and only through him could we make sense of our existence. He said only he could give us the real peace of mind that, at times, we all long for.

If there is just a chance Jesus was telling the truth and can make a difference in our lives, then it has to be worth taking a little time to check the evidence.

There are several websites that help investigate the evidence:

www.bethinking.org and www.reasonablefaith.org

If you have questions having read this article, please take up our coffee and questions option that you'll find on the backpage.

We buy you a coffee and try to help you find answers to your questions while you drink it. The evidence is clear – Jesus is a real person from history.

We can't just ignore the things he said.

Loaded Question

The man sat down in the middle of the clearing, legs and arms crossed, face like thunder.

The squirrel on a nearby tree watched him, curiosity etched all over its cute little features. When it could take it no longer, it scrambled along the branch, down the trunk and skittered over to the man.

The man watched the squirrel. Actually, glared at the squirrel would be more accurate.

“What are you doing?” the squirrel said.

“I’m waiting,” the man said.

“For what?” the squirrel said.

“For a miracle,” said the man.

“A miracle?” said the squirrel.

“Yes, a miracle,” said the man.

The squirrel thought for a moment. “Why?”

“Because,” the man began, “I am sick of God not doing anything. I’ve waited for Him and trusted Him for a long time, and nothing’s ever happened. I’ve decided that if God exists, then He owes me a miracle, and I’m going to sit here until He does it, and if He doesn’t, then there’s only one conclusion to

draw. Namely, that there’s no God.”

The squirrel thought for a bit longer.

“What kind of miracle? Something like water being turned into wine?”

“That would do for a start,” said the man.

“Well, just over that hill there’s a vineyard, and the rain falls, and the vines grow and the grapes are turned into wine. Water into wine. Surely that’s a miracle?” said the squirrel.

“Doesn’t count,” said the man.

“Why not?”

“It’s not a proper miracle. It’s just something that happens naturally.”

The squirrel thought of one or two clever replies, but kept them to himself.



“Well, what about five thousand being fed from five loaves?” he finally said.

“Yes, that would qualify as a miracle,” the man agreed.

“Just over that other hill there’s a wheat field. All that wheat will feed many thousands of people, yet it all started with sowing some tiny seeds,” the squirrel began.

“Oh no you don’t,” interrupted the man. “I know where you’re going with this and it doesn’t count either. In fact, it’s all I ever hear. Whenever I ask for a miracle, all people ever say is, ‘What about this common thing that happens every day?’ and I’m fed up with it. It doesn’t count. None of that normal, everyday stuff counts. I want a miracle. A proper, bona fide, honest-to-goodness miracle. Something that isn’t ordinary. Something that can’t be explained by anything other than God.”

The squirrel thought of a couple of clever replies to this too, but he also thought about some nuts, and then decided to say something else entirely.

“What about if you saw someone who was dead come back to life?” he said.

“That would be amazing,” said the man.

“Every day thousands of new people spring into being. They weren’t just dead; they didn’t even exist! And then, there they are! Surely that’s a miracle!”

“You’re talking about babies and stuff, aren’t you?” said the man.

“Yes,” said the squirrel.

The man threw his arms up in the air.

“How many times do I have to say it? IT DOESN’T COUNT. Those aren’t miracles, they’re just normal things. That’s it. I’ve had it!” the man said.

He uncurled himself, stood up and stomped off out of the clearing.

“I’m done with this. It’s clear to me now. There is NO GOD!” he yelled, as he left the clearing.

The squirrel watched him go, shrugged and scampered back up the tree.

In heaven, God rolled His eyes.

“Unbelievable. You mean that a talking squirrel wasn’t enough?”

James has had a variety of interesting learning experiences in his life, some from being a Baptist minister in the UK and some from being a member of Cornerstone Community, a mission and discipleship community in Australia. He currently lives in Canterbury with his wife and five children.



‘The Second Listening Book’ will be released this Autumn 2016, available from Waterstones and all other good bookstores and online via Amazon, published by Lioness Writing Ltd. This is a sneak preview of the first story....

Illustration by Carys Jenkins

“My relationship with JESUS has kept me safe, gotten me through tough times and is the reason for my success. Nothing I have done has been in my own strength or for my own glory, but His”

Gemma Hunt is a children’s TV presenter and has been part of the hugely successful, Bafta-award winning Cbeebies programme ‘Swashbuckle’. We caught up with her while she was filming in Canada to talk about her Christian faith...

Gemma, you go to a church in Dover. What is your favourite thing about living in Kent?

It reminds me a lot of where I grew up, in Trowbridge, in the West Country. Especially when we lived in Faversham, as Trowbridge was a brewery town so I loved the smell of hops in the air in Faversham! Canterbury also reminds me of Bath, where I used to go to a lot as a child. So living in East Kent really is a “home from home” for me, with the beautiful countryside but with the added bonus of the gorgeous coastline too.

What do you enjoy most about working in Children’s television?

I’ve always wanted to try to be a positive role model to children, so working in children’s television gives me an incredible platform for that. It’s very rewarding hearing from parents or meeting children who have enjoyed or been inspired by what I do. It makes the early mornings and long days totally worth it!

What is the most exciting thing you’ve done because of your job?



I’ve had the privilege of travelling all over the world with my job, to a lot of places that I probably wouldn’t ordinarily visit, like Ghana, Costa Rica, Australia and more recently Hong Kong and Israel whilst filming for the Alpha Film Series.

Can you tell us about how you became a Christian?

My mum used to take me along to church when I was young, so I grew up going to Sunday school but it wasn’t until I went to a youth summer camp when I was 11 that I truly discovered a personal faith in Jesus. Being around other young Christians allowed me to develop my faith in a safe environment where I felt free to express myself and really encounter the Holy Spirit.

It was more challenging to keep this up when I came home, even though I belonged to a great youth group at church. It was at this summer camp that I became a Christian, a special day

that was the beginning of an incredible adventure with the Lord.

What are some of the challenges of being a Christian in the media for you (if there are any!)?

Probably the same as anyone who doesn't work in the media! Although when you might feel under scrutiny by your peers at work, I am quite literally in the spotlight with mine. This has its positives, in that I now feel much more comfortable and confident to share my faith or offer to pray for people because I've matured in my faith and in my career.

But there are still difficult times when I may find myself in compromising situations. My faith is so much of who I am that it doesn't matter whether I'm at work, church or home, I am the same Gemma!

You're doing this interview while filming for Alpha. Can you tell us what Alpha is and how you've been involved?

Alpha is a course which helps people to explore some of life's biggest questions about faith. The Alpha team wanted to refresh the videos that accompany the series to reach a new generation and recruited me to be one of the presenters.

We have filmed globally in Vancouver, Normandy, Paris, New York plus many others, to share the gospel and discuss big issues regarding faith.

Why would you encourage people to go on an Alpha course?

It's a well thought out, safe environment to share your views, ask your questions and dig deeply in to the Christian faith. It has inspired, encouraged and changed people's lives and I pray that it continues to do so.

Who is Jesus to you?

My go-to. My safe place. My constant. My friend & comforter. Someone I can always talk to and rely on. My inspiration. My calm in the storm.

How has your love for Jesus impacted on your career?

I really couldn't do it all without Jesus. I honestly don't know how others go through life without Him. My relationship with Jesus has kept me safe, gotten me through tough times and is the reason for my success. Nothing I have done has been in my own strength or for my own glory, but His.

Yes, it's nice to be acknowledged for doing a good job or receiving a round of applause for a performance but I know in my heart that Jesus deserves the praise. I'm just doing what I can with what He has given me.

Is there a particular Bible passage that encourages you?

This verse from Philippians 4:13, '**I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me**', definitely crosses my mind in those times of self doubt or unworthiness or when I feel out of my depth, which happens a lot. But I can testify to God's goodness as I know He will '**never leave me nor forsake me**' (Deuteronomy 31:6).

You can find out more about what Gemma has done and what projects are coming up on her website: www.gemmahunt.com

If you are interested in the Alpha course, email us at prodigal@bartonchurch.org.uk to find out when the next course starts.

A close-up photograph of a hand lighting a candle. The candle is lit, and the flame is visible. The background is dark, making the candle and the hand stand out.

A Light

in the Darkness

The past year has been a transformative and liberating journey as my eyes, my mind and my heart have been opened to the gospel in a new way.

Part of the reason for this has been meetings with a pastor and a friend whose wisdom, care and patience has served to open doors for me around understanding evidence for Jesus and his resurrection which I didn't know existed.



Alongside this, they have taught me to pray and to see in God something which I had not previously.

I grew up in a non-Christian home, where God was never encouraged to dwell. I never went to church until I met my wife who was a practicing Christian. As a Primary School teacher and then head

teacher I always saw myself as a caring and good person keen to do the right thing for other people and lived my life accordingly.

Around 20 years ago I lost my way with regards to faith and would express myself as “spiritual but not religious” - whatever that meant!

In 2010, at the age of 55, I was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease and, whilst this is frightening, I trust in God's goodness and grace, knowing that my faith has given me an opportunity to utilise my skills to serve him and to help others.

When delivering talks and seeking to advise professionals working in this field I know that God is with me, guiding me to help raise public awareness of this disease and filling me with peace towards this challenging condition.

Nearly all my life I have been seen as a “rock” for other people; recently I have sought and needed a rock I can rely upon.

Keith has lived in the Canterbury area since 1981. He likes to keep busy, enjoying walks on the Hambrook marshes, spending time with his family and listening to music from a range of eras, including bands from the 1960s right up to Mumford & Sons.

Statistically Speaking

Every year, church attendance in the UK drops and the headlines often read that Christianity is in decline. But how does the picture look across the rest of the world? We check out some statistics to find out...



What comes to mind when you hear the words 'church congregation'? The media would often have us believe this is a handful of elderly people holding fundraising events to try and keep the roof on their church building.

Whilst that may occasionally be true here in the UK, it certainly is not the whole story - and around the world it couldn't be further from the truth.

It can be helpful to look at statistics at this point. Far from declining it is estimated that around 110,000 people become Christians *each day* around the world.

To help accommodate

these numbers 3,600 new churches are opened each Sunday.

Some churches are so large they defy all our perceptions. So-called mega churches have Sunday congregations in the thousands.

Interestingly, of the largest 10 congregations in the world, none of them are in the USA (where most people think large churches are to be found) but are in Korea, Argentina, India and China. Many would have a Sunday attendance in excess of 40,000 people.

Even in Britain the picture is not all of decline; 1000 new churches have opened

in London in the last 7 years and new churches are starting all across the country.

So what do these statistics show? That the Christian faith, far from being out dated and in decline, is a faith that is making a very real difference in a growing number of people's lives all around the world.

Each day, large numbers of new people are discovering the life changing power and relevance that faith has in their lives.

Eric Harmer is pastor of Barton Church. He is an avid Formula 1 fan and is sometimes accused of being a bit nerdy.

WHEN GOD GIVES UP



The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘to forgive’ as to give up, to cease to harbour (resentment, wrath). In a world where the struggle for power consumes governments, the media and relationships and giving up is seen as weakness and failure, it’s easy to see how forgiveness could be linked to the notion of defeat and the relinquishing of control.

Yet science tells us that forgiveness, both the giving and receiving of, has powerful effects on our physical and psychological health, lowering stress levels and blood pressure and, perhaps unsurprisingly, making us feel happier as we become liberated from the anger and hurt. In giving up, therefore, we make room for healing.

To non-Christians, perhaps it can look like Christianity is all about sin – after all, isn’t that what one of the first few stories of the Bible is about? Adam and Eve disobey God, eat the forbidden fruit and are sent out of the Garden of Eden to live in a fallen world.

And then Jesus is crucified and in some theological twist of events, Christians can repent of the things they’ve done wrong and yet the cross is always a reminder of the guilt and shame they should feel.

It may surprise you, therefore, to learn that the main message of the bible is not judgement but forgiveness.

The name of this magazine refers to a story that Jesus tells in The New Testament which encapsulates how God views forgiveness and us.

In the story, a son leaves his father’s home and squanders all of his inheritance on worldly possessions and desires and when he returns home, he is prepared to be given a lowly position in his father’s household, admitting that he has sinned and asking for forgiveness.

The response of the father is counter-cultural both to First Century Palestine when Jesus is telling the story and to today’s world. “Filled with compassion” for his son, the father runs to him, embraces him and throws a party to celebrate his return.

He disregards what society expects of him and chooses to forgive rather than to punish. Jesus uses this story as an illustration of how God reacts when we come to him in true repentance of our sins, forgiving us completely and restoring our broken relationship with him.

refuse to let them pay anything and absorb the whole cost yourself or you can each pay half to fix the window.

Whatever option you choose, someone has to pay the cost for the damage. Jesus, by giving up His life on the cross, declares how God himself has absorbed

“GOD IS FAITHFUL AND RELIABLE. IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS, HE FORGIVES THEM AND CLEANSSES US FROM EVERYTHING WE’VE DONE WRONG.” 1 JOHN 1:9

But why did Jesus have to die so that we could be forgiven? Surely God could just forgive us. What is the point of the cross?

the whole cost of the debt of our wrongdoings which is death, rather than making us pay for it.

Imagine someone hits a cricket ball in your garden and breaks a window on your house. This window now needs repairing and either you can make them pay for the breakage, you can

When we forgive someone, it costs us something because we have to live with and bear the consequences of what they have done without making them pay for it. That’s what forgiveness is. And that is what Jesus has achieved for us.



When Christians look to the cross they see God embracing weakness and humiliation rather than bitterness and anger; they see love conquer shame; they see Him choose reconciliation over rejection in order to forgive us.

It is the ultimate sign of giving up and yet the most powerful sign of taking up: taking up the cost of our wrongdoings and rebellion, taking up our brokenness and taking up a personal and loving relationship with us. A relationship that satisfies fully and will last for eternity.

Rose Cole is a recent graduate of the University of Kent in English Literature and French. She loves travelling, skiing and reading recipes she’ll never cook.

Sunday Church

We are a growing church of all ages, welcoming everyone. We meet on Sunday mornings at 10.30am in Canterbury College, New Dover Road, Canterbury.

Come early and meet us before the service - coffee and doughnuts are served from 10am.

For more information see our website, www.bartonchurch.org.uk

Counselling Service

We provide a free, face-to-face counselling service in the community of Canterbury and can work with a range of issues including:

- Stress
- Depression and anxiety
- Bereavement and loss
- Abuse
- Addiction
- Family or relational difficulties

Barton Church provides this service to anyone over 16, irrespective of their faith position. Counselling sessions are held in Canterbury. Please call 07802 810669.



EXPLORE

THE QUESTION I WOULD LIKE ANSWERED IS...

-----?

I WOULD LIKE...

(PLEASE TICK)

- A FREE BIBLE
- TO MEET WITH A CHURCH LEADER FOR A COFFEE AND TO HAVE MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED
- INFORMATION ABOUT THE ALPHA COURSE
- A FREE COPY OF 'REASON FOR GOD'
- A WEEKLY E-MAIL ABOUT CHURCH ACTIVITIES

CONTACT DETAILS

FULL NAME: -----

ADDRESS: -----

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E-MAIL: -----

PLEASE RETURN TO:
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32 BARTON ROAD,
CANTERBURY,
CT1 1YQ