

5 REASONS WHY JESUS MATTERS THIS CHRISTMAS

Jesus is bigger than The Beatles

Both photos: AAP



GREG CLARKE offers five reasons why we should pay attention to Jesus this Christmas.

He's too famous to ignore

1 As a celebrity, there isn't anyone who comes close to Jesus. He is the ultimate rags to riches story. He was born in poverty to an unmarried mother, raised in a trade (carpentry, they say), but he struck everyone around him as wise beyond his years or experience.

He grew up to be a magnet to controversy, speaking out against the leaders of his day and challenging their hypocrisy and grand delusions.

His untimely death was a shock to his followers, and the rumours of his resurrection from the tomb a scandal and embarrassment to the Roman Empire.

But Jesus' fame outstripped anyone's expectations. His reputation gradually grew until a few centuries later, most of Europe and Asia Minor was engaged with 'Christianity', a full-blown religion that grew out of Jesus' life and words.

Followers of Jesus spread across the world, often sacrificing comfort and security to bring the news of Jesus to far-flung countries. Why? Because these Christians were compelled by Jesus' message of hope and rescue. It had to be shared.

Now, over a third of the world's popula-

tion describes itself as 'Christian' – followers of Jesus. John Lennon might have thought the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, but his maths was out.

You can't escape him anyway

2 The average Aussie has to work pretty hard to escape Jesus. He's everywhere you look. Hop on the train, and sitting across from you is a teenager with a crucifix around her neck, a man reading *The Da Vinci Code* (it's about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, if you are one of the three people who hasn't read it!), and a nun (they call them 'brides of Christ').

Open up the paper, and there's Kevin Rudd or Peter Costello talking about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the Christian values of the nation. There's an ad on the train wall for a charity, like Anglicare or St Vincent de Paul, which talks about caring for 'the least' in our society – words that come from the sayings of Jesus.

Out the carriage window, there are church steeples with crosses on them. There's a billboard with Madonna and a huge metal cross. And there's a car going past with a fish sticker on the bumper bar – one of the oldest Christian symbols we know about.

You might not know anything about Jesus, but you can hardly get away from him. Even cursing brings him to mind.

He's our gateway to understanding our past

3 If you want to understand the history of the Western world (and, indeed, some of the Eastern, too), you need a grasp of who Jesus is and the impact he has had on history. There is more high-quality evidence from the ancient world about Jesus than there is about

His philosophy of life offers more than anyone else's does

4 The great teachers of philosophy – Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – taught for a total of 130 years, filled many books and taught hundreds of students. Jesus taught for three years, never wrote a book and died before his teachings took off. Yet, how many followers of Plato do you know? Compare that with the number of followers of the teachings of Jesus.

Certainly, there are other influential religious teachers who claim to teach the Good Life. Buddha taught that life is suffering and we should just escape it. Muhammad commanded people to submit to Allah's will, whatever the cost.

But only one teacher suggests that all the answers to life's questions are ultimately found in him. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life". To say that all the answers to life are found in understanding YOU could be the insane claim of a deluded megalomaniac – or it could be the truth.

As one renowned theologian wrote, "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way."

He gives us what we need and long for

5 People often say that they wish they could see God – then they could believe in him.

In Jesus, we get what we want. The Bible teaches that God was fully present in Jesus, in human form. Christians call it the 'incarnation'. It's the point at which God became human. It's Christmas Day.

Jesus also brings what we all talk about at Christmas time: peace and hope.

The peace that Christmas brings is always short-lived, shattered by a family fight or by a tsunami, washing away our hopes and dreams. But Jesus is described in the Bible as 'the Prince of Peace', because his life, death and resurrection secured a lasting peace for humanity. The peace he brings is spiritual peace, and no one and nothing can take it away.

Christians often complain when people call Christmas 'Xmas' because it takes the 'Christ' out of the day. The 'Christ' bit is where our hope lies, because it means 'saviour' and that's who Jesus is. Christmas is a chapter in the great story of God's love for us. It leaves us in no doubt that Jesus matters as much today as he ever has.



You can't escape Jesus ... even at a pop concert

any other important figure.

In the first 100 years after Jesus' time on earth, many people came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, as he had claimed to be, and many joined together as churches to worship him and pray to him as God.

In the fourth century, the emperor Constantine made it possible to be a Christian without fear of persecution and torture – a great relief to many!

From that point on, Christianity began to gain a grip not only on people's hearts but also on the structures of societies: our schools, our welfare systems, our governments, our laws. It infused our culture, too, with Bible stories shaping our music, literature, art and architecture.

If you consider yourself a Westerner and you don't know much about Jesus, you have a huge hole in your education. Blame the system, or start to patch up the hole yourself by reading the Bible this Christmas.